“They said that I play like a man, but they’re using the wrong terminology. The main thing is that I play so good”

– Beverly “Guitar” Watkins (1939–2019)
A letter from our Co-Founders

Dear Friends of Music Maker,

In February, board member Carey Barnes, Denise and I traveled to England, where Music Maker artist Freeman Vines had his museum debut at The Turner Contemporary Museum of Art. We were so excited to see one of our musicians from Eastern North Carolina getting international recognition, including a beautiful color photograph of one of his guitars in The Guardian.

Upon our return, we hosted record executive Bruce Watson of Fat Possum and Bible & Tire Records at our new Music Maker East studio in Fountain, NC. Bruce recorded and filmed 13 Sacred Soul groups in five days for an upcoming album and documentary. Sacred Soul artists, the Dedicated Men of Zion, family, and friends at Music Maker 25, 2019 © M. Austin


Music Maker chose not to lose heart or momentum, but to pivot hard and lean into this pandemic era and the challenges it presents. A number of stalwart supporters put together a $60,000 matching gift challenge. Through the generosity of hundreds of individuals and significant support from a few granting foundations, that challenge was met with more than $100,000 worth of support.

Since then, Music Maker has been able to more than double the amount of financial assistance provided to our Partner Artists and replace 50% of our musicians’ lost gig income for April, May, and June. We were also able to reach out to our friends at the New Orleans Preservation Hall and welcome 12 new musicians to our Sustenance Program.

Our Artist Services Specialist, Christelle Ndong, MSW formed a COVID-19 Care Team with our most trusted volunteers. They have been assessing and monitoring artist needs with biweekly check-ins. In response to those needs, we arranged grocery deliveries, connected artists with other assistance programs, provided gift cards so others can shop for artists in isolation, and more. The artists often tell Christelle that the calls from her and her team of volunteers mean as much to them as the prescription medicine or home deliveries of food. Isolation and loneliness weigh heavy on our Partner Artists, and we all need each other during this challenging time.

Our small, dedicated team banded together to keep our mission alive. Miraculously, Jeffrey Brown of PBS NewsHour responded to our inquiry and put together a feature story on Pat “Mother Blues” Cohen and how she is handling this crisis. With no money to give, she gives her talent, singing to her brother and the other residents at the nursing home where he resides in Salisbury, NC. There was an overwhelming response to this piece, bringing in many new supporters to our mission. We welcome you all and thank you dearly for your support.

While we are saddened by the merciless toll of COVID-19 on the elderly and in communities of color, we are also inspired by the increased awareness and demand for social justice and racial equity that is arising in our nation. Breaking the silence of white supremacy and reckoning honestly with our history, and present, is the only way America will ever fulfill its promise of liberty and justice for all.

Freeman Vines examines his personal journey of being Black in rural America in his new book and exhibition entitled Hanging Tree Guitars. This exhibit was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is premiering near Freeman’s hometown at the Greenville Museum of Art this summer and will be touring the country for years to come. We made a virtual exhibit at exhibit.hangingtreeguitars.com so everyone, everywhere can experience this work. The book and exhibition are the culmination of a five-year partnership between Freeman and Music Maker. Don’t miss this incredibly moving book, now available at musician.org.

This summer, we were able to continue our Freight Train Blues series online. We will be offering livestream concerts throughout the fall, so please keep an eye on our social media and website tour calendar so you can join us. We remain steadfast in our mission and we will survive and learn from this experience, so that when we get to the other side, we will be stronger and better equipped to continue to help the artists we serve.

We need our American Bards at such times, they give us something to hold onto, a moment of brightness and understanding and relief from the day to day in this world of crisis.

Thank you so much for supporting the Music Makers!

- Tim & Denise Duffy

“We need our American Bards... they give us something to hold onto.”
Freeman Vines: Hanging Tree Guitars

Following a group show at the Turner Contemporary in Kent, UK, Freeman Vines’ work will premiere in the US with the solo exhibition: **Hanging Tree Guitars** at the Greenville Museum of Art.

**Greenville Museum of Art** (Greenville, NC)

**Portsmouth Art & Cultural Center** (Portsmouth, VA)
Feb. 15 2021 – May 7, 2021

**The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art** (Winston-Salem, NC)
Jun. 9, 2021 – Sept. 15, 2021

**Other Exhibit Dates**

**Blue Muse**
Phillips Museum of Art (Lancaster, PA)
Jan. 19, 2021 – May 15, 2021

**Our Living Past**
Birthplace of Country Music Museum (Bristol, VA) Apr. 18, 2021 – Sep. 30, 2021
Piedmont Arts (Martinsville, VA) Jan. 21, 2022 – Mar. 12, 2022

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**Hanging Tree Guitars Exhibition Sponsorship:** The National Endowment for the Humanities and Music Maker Relief Foundation together: Exploring the human endeavor. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

**Go to exhibit.hangingtreeguitars.com to explore Freeman Vines’ virtual exhibition!**

**Check out all our releases on bandcamp!**

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**Freeman Vines: Hanging Tree Guitars at Greenville Museum of Art, 2020 © W. Wojdynski**

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**Check out our blog:** musicmaker.org/blog
NC roots music series

8/20  Lakota John
9/17  The Hamiltones
10/15 Dedicated Men of Zion
11/19  Martha Spencer
12/17  Big Ron Hunter

Tune in every 3rd Thursday at 6pm for these live stream concerts

musicmaker.org/NCr rootsmusicseries

IN CONVERSATION: FREEMAN VINES

ONLINE ARTIST TALKS
FEATURING:

AUG 27  NDUBUISI EZELUOMBA
SEP 24  VALERIE CASSEL OLIVER
OCT 22  LONNIE HOLLEY
NOV 12  HANNAH COLLINS

TUNE IN: MUSICMAKER.ORG/INCONVERSATION

FREEMAN VINES

FREEMAN VINES’ ROOTS ARE DEEP AND STRONG, DRAWN FROM THE BLOODY SOIL OF NORTH CAROLINA’S JIM CROW ERA. SCULPTOR AND LUTHER, HE LISTENS TO WHAT THE WOOD SAYS TO HIM AS HE CARVES, AND HE USES ONLY OLD- TIME TOOLS AND HIS SPIRIT TO CRAFT HIS GUITARS’ RHYTHMIC AND EVOCATIVE SOUNDS.

IT’S HARD TO EXPLAIN WHAT IT IS, AND MAYBE IT’S A FEELING, BUT IT’S A TONE... THAT I CAN’T FIND AGAIN.

WHY AM I MAKING ALL OF THESE GUITARS? WELL, THEY KIND OF MAKE ME HAPPY. TO TELL THE TRUTH.

I THINK THE WHOLE EXISTENCE OF MAN IS NOTHING BUT A SHOUT OR SOMETHING.

DURING THE SIXTIES, HE MADE MUSIC ON FRONT PORCHES AND SHOT GUNSHOTS. HOW HIS MUSIC IS MAKING GUITARS, FREEMAN HAS TRANSFORMED OLD PIECES OF SOUND WOOD FROM TOBACCO BARING, TUMORS, HICKORY TOUGH AND EVEN HANGING TREES INTO MUSICAL WORKS OF ART. THE TONE HE’S LONG SEARCHED FOR, THE TONE OF A TRUTH SEEKER, RESONATES WITH BOTH HIS SCULPTURES AND IN THE SOUL OF THIS ARTIST.
The Pandemic has dug itself deep into the already struggling healthcare systems and economies of the rural South. One of Music Maker’s newer partner artists, Willie Farmer, felt its impact immediately. A mechanic by trade and lifelong resident of Duck Hill, Mississippi (pop. 732), Willie has played music his entire life and represents the rich blues traditions of his state. Since partnering with Willie in 2018, Music Maker was able to secure a record deal with legendary producer Bruce Watson and book him on some of the biggest stages around. Things were on the up-and-up for Mr. Farmer.

In March of 2020, shortly after COVID-19 began to spread through the South, Willie saw all of his upcoming gigs wiped off his calendar—including his debut at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Fast forward a couple weeks later and his mechanic work had slowed down substantially. On April 23 brutal storms ripped through North Central Mississippi, destroying a substantial portion of Willie’s roof. We see this in our work every day—life’s curveballs are relentless, making hard situations even harder. The cycle of poverty doles out constant obstacles, and doesn’t stop just because of a pandemic or a natural disaster.

Music Maker quickly sent Willie an emergency grant so he could purchase shingles for his roof. Through our COVID-19 Response Program, Music Maker was also able to provide Willie with financial assistance to make up for the gigs he lost. When asked about his experience as a Partner Artist, Willie had this to say: “Music Maker is top of the line. When they say they’re going to help, they do it. There aren’t too many people like that. People tend to tell you one thing and do another, but Music Maker does exactly what they say. I’m proud to be a Music Maker.”

The End of the Regular Gig

The Blues was born in the South and dispersed wherever people would congregate. Shot houses, railroad depots, local bars, VFW halls, and other community gathering places served as the melting pots in which our greatest cultural export was forged. These regular gigs provided daily bread for the artists who played them and continue to be a critical part of the working musician’s ability to sustain themselves.

There are no better representatives of the working musician than Music Maker Partner Artists Ernie Vincent and Albert White. Ernie (New Orleans, LA) and Albert (Atlanta, GA) have been performing weekly at bars and clubs in their hometowns since the early 1960s. For these two, a 50-year run of steady gigs suddenly ended in this pandemic, with no end in sight.

Another prime example is Pat “Mother Blues” Cohen. A Katrina survivor with 20 years’ experience of Bourbon Street performance, Pat Cohen is known for her incredible showmanship and infectious confidence. She had a regular paying gig at The Citadel nursing home in Salisbury, NC, where her brother lives, singing to the facility’s residents. The nursing home was the site of a notable COVID-19 outbreak, with over 150 cases in the 160-bed facility.

Even though a lockdown forced the home to cancel all of Pat’s paying gigs, she continues to sing to her brother and the other residents outside of their windows. “Everybody is stuck in their rooms, everybody is afraid,” says Pat. “I want to do something that’s going to brighten up their day.”

Thanks to the support of our donors, Music Maker stepped in to provide critical support for Albert White, Ernie Vincent, and Pat “Mother Blues” Cohen when their regular gigs came to an abrupt halt. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate Music Maker helping me,” says Ernie.

The Coronavirus Blues

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“Music Maker is top of the line... I’m proud to be a Music Maker.”
- Willie Farmer
2019/20 FINANCIAL REPORT

$1,041,002 Total Budget

- Fundraising: $86,921 (8%)
- Management: $63,185 (6%)
- Programs: $890,896 (86%)

Audited financial statements available upon request.

WHAT WE’VE ACCOMPLISHED

13,196 MUSICIAN GRANTS
8,018 PERFORMANCES
2,643 SONGS RELEASED
457 PARTNER ARTISTS
32 COUNTRIES TOURED
26 YEARS
3 PROGRAMS
1 MISSION

WHAT WE’VE ACCOMPLISHED

Freeman Vines’ first international showing of his sculptures was featured in The Guardian with photos. ★ Beverly “Guitar Watkins, Sam Clayton, and Lee Gates passed on. ★ Music Maker helped Willie James Williams, Little Pink Anderson, Ester Mae Wilbourn, and Willie Farmer complete major home repairs, from replacing roofs to rewiring electric. ★ Robert Finley made it to the semi-finals on America’s Got Talent. ★ In late February Music Maker, with the help of Pastor Alice Vines, gathered 13 of Eastern North Carolina’s finest Sacred Soul groups for a week of recording sessions in Fountain, NC at Music Maker East with Bible & Tire Records. The recording session showcased both young tradition bearers and their forebears. ★ We helped Sam Frazier, Jr. and Ironing Board Sam refurnished their homes. ★ Sadly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, every Spring, Summer, and Fall gig has been cancelled, most notably New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, Telluride Blues & Brews, Baton Rouge Blues Festival, Porto Blues Festival, Celebrate Brooklyn, and the Savannah Jazz Festival. ★ The Dedicated Men of Zion’s release Can’t Turn Me Around was featured on NPR’s All Songs Considered New Music Fridays. ★ Music Maker 25 at Duke University was a rousing success with nearly sold-out crowds for all seven shows. The festival, celebrating Music Maker’s 25th anniversary, brought in Music Maker artists and friends from across the country and featured more than 50 musicians. ★ Pat “Mother Blues” Cohen was featured on PBS Newshour, Rollingstone.com, and CNN.com for her social distance performances at nursing homes during the pandemic. ★ The annual Freight Train Blues concert series went virtual and featured livestream performances from Phil Cook, Hiss Golden Messenger, Mandolin Orange, Lightnin’ Wells, and Thomas Rhyan. ★ The art installations with large-scale portraits of Ironing Board Sam and Guitar Lightnin’ Lee are still on display throughout New Orleans from last spring’s premiere of Blue Muse. Over 25 million people have seen their portraits throughout the city. Special thanks to Russell Lord and the New Orleans Museum of Art!

ARTIST NOTES

Major Handy (L) and Reggie Dural (R) performing at Music Maker 25, 2019 © J. Womack
Sam Frazier, Jr. is living day by day. All of his local gigs have been canceled and he is unable to stay completely isolated due to his dialysis treatments, which happen three times a week. Music Maker provides Sam with grocery deliveries and granted him a new guitar so that he could continue songwriting while in isolation.

© T. Duffy

Ester Mae Wilbourn, lead singer of The Como Mamas, received an emergency grant in April to replace her roof, renewing her sense of security while in quarantine. Music Maker is currently working to get more critical repairs done to Ester’s home in Como, MS.

© A. Greenhood

Another legend gone. We are deeply saddened by the loss of longtime Partner Artist Lee Gates, who passed away on April 15th, 2020. Born in Pontotoc, MS in 1937, his tenacity on the electric guitar was only matched by his physical presence.

© T. Duffy

In the midst of the COVID-19, our good friends at Cathead Distillery shifted their operations to produce hand sanitizer. Cathead has supported Music Maker’s mission for over 10 years, and their desire to help important Southern musicians hasn’t gone away in the pandemic. Cathead graciously donated Comfort & Mercy Hand Sanitizer to our Partner Artists.
★ 2020 ALBUM RELEASES ★

Various Artists, Amazing Grace

Harvey Dalton Arnold, Stories To Live Up To

Various Artists, Hanging Tree Guitars

Dedicated Men of Zion, Can’t Turn Me Around (Bible & Tire Recording Co.)

Various Artists, Grotto Sessions (En Avant La Zizique)

Hanging Tree Guitars – Available Now

“A fabulous book—just profoundly beautiful, filled with extraordinary materials, and terrific photographs.”

– Carrie Mae Weems

Price: $28.00

Limited number of signed 1st edition books available. Visit musicmaker.org/shop to purchase and for more info.

To meet Freeman Vines is to meet America itself. An artist, a luthier and a spiritual philosopher, Vines’ life is a roadmap of the truths and contradictions of the American South.

In 2015 Vines befriends photographer Timothy Duffy and the two begin to document the guitars, setting off a mutual outpouring of the creative spirit. But when Vines acquires a mysterious stack of wood from the site of a lynching, Vines and Duffy find themselves each grappling with the spiritual unrest and the psychic toll of racial violence living in the very grain of America.

Published by the Bitter Southerner in association with Music Maker Relief Foundation. (1st edition, paperback, 8.5 x 11in, 159 pages, 80 duotone images)

Visit musicmaker.org/shop for more info and to purchase!
With a Legacy Gift, you can transform the work of Music Maker Relief Foundation for future generations to access their cultural heritage and continue this vital work.

We have history. We have community. Together we can create a legacy.

There are numerous ways to plan a gift for the future. Your Legacy Gift:

✓ Allows you to be more generous that you ever thought.
✓ Costs you nothing during your lifetime.

Mollie O’Reilly at 919-643-2456 or mollie@musicmaker.org

Create Your Legacy