



A Husband and Father to Lean On

Bill Withers grew up in the small town of Slab Fork, West Virginia. In Slab Fork, almost all the men were miners, and almost all the families were poor.

The people in Bill's hometown didn't have much money, but they had one another to lean on. If anyone needed a hand doing some work, someone helped. If anyone needed to talk over a problem, someone listened. If anyone needed to borrow a tool or a cup of sugar, someone lent it. For example, Bill's family had a telephone, but not a refrigerator. The neighbors across the road had a refrigerator, but not a telephone. When Bill's family needed ice, they walked across the road and got it from the neighbors. When those neighbors needed to make a phone call, they walked across the road and used the phone at Bill's house.

Bill's father died when Bill was 13 -- a lot of miners died young -- and his family became even poorer. So when he was 17, Bill left home to join the U. S. Navy. He didn't want to work in the mines, and the navy gave him his best chance at a better life. The navy trained him as a mechanic, and for nine years he traveled around the world on navy ships. In his free time, he wrote songs. His friends told him his songs were good.

After Bill got out of the navy, he moved to Los Angeles and got a job in an airplane factory. In his free time, he continued to write songs. He bought a small electric piano, and he liked to run his fingers up and down the keys. Sometimes he found the melody for a song that way.

One day Bill was sitting at the piano when he got an idea for a song. "Lean on me," he sang as he played. "It's a good beginning," Bill thought. "But how should the song continue? What are some examples of people helping one another? Where do people lean on one another? In Los Angeles? No, in Los Angeles, a man can die on the side of the freeway and it's eight days before anybody notices."

Bill thought about his hometown, Slab Fork. He remembered all the borrowing and lending; the talking and listening; the working and helping. *That* was a place where people leaned on one another. When Bill thought about Slab Fork, he knew how to continue the song. A long time ago, the people there had shown him how.

The song "Lean on Me" was a big hit. Bill wrote other hit songs, too, and he became a famous musician. But when he was 47 years old, he suddenly quit the music business: He stopped performing, and he stopped writing songs. Why? He had a wife and two children--a boy and a girl--and he wanted to be near them. He knew how difficult it was to grow up without a father. He didn't want to be in a recording studio or on a stage in a faraway city when his children needed him. He gave up fame -- and a lot of money -- to be a husband and father his family could always lean on.