

# Bluegrass Confidential By Chuck Poling



## Bill Amateek

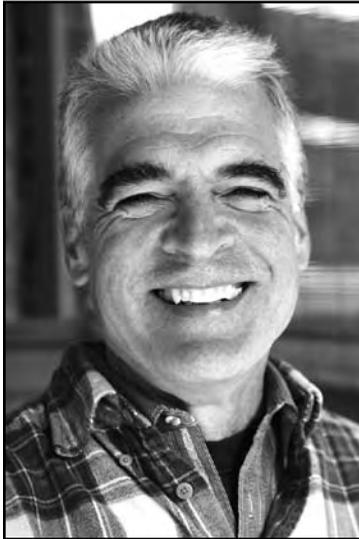
Storytelling is humankind's oldest form of entertainment. Before Ogg the caveman ever struck a hollow log with a stick to create the world's first musical instrument, our prehistoric ancestors regaled each other with tales of the world around them. Sometimes these stories had a purpose – to serve as oral history, to explain the forces of nature, or to teach skills essential to the tribe's survival. But certainly, humans being humans and all, many more tales were told simply to provide entertainment.

The United States has rich history of storytelling. The tall tales of mythical figures such as Paul Bunyan and John Henry, and the semi-fictional accounts of “ring-tailed roarers” of the American frontier like Davy Crockett and Mike Fink, have become part of our nation's heritage. That these stories are embellished, exaggerated or just plain fiction is less important than the quintessential “American-ness” they convey – the rugged individualism of their heroes, the opening of a vast, seemingly endless frontier,

and the rightfully boastful pride of a young, energetic nation.

Bluegrassers are no exception and, if anything, are as fond of telling stories as they are of pickin'. Whether it's a tale about the Gibson mandolin they found in their aunt's attic or their experience sharing an elevator with Jimmy Martin at IBMA, bluegrassers love to tell stories. Heck, most bluegrass songs are simply stories put to music.

Bill Amateek, known to many CBA members from his days as a bass player for Frank Wakefield,



Bill Amateek, storyteller.

David Grisman and Peter Rowan, has just published “Acoustic Stories” on Vineyard Press, a collection of tales that begin with his childhood in Greenwich Village and follows him through a long career as a bass player for a who's who of late 20th-century popular music.

But Acoustic Stories isn't just about Bill and his bass playing. Bill is an astute observer and interpreter of human behavior. More than anything else, he's a storyteller. He begins the book by informing the reader that what follows is all true – in the larger sense of the story. As he put it:

“Storytellers differentiate between facts and truth. Journalists supposedly pursue facts, the absolute reality, also known as the story's heart. If a teller has told the heart of a story as he feels it, he has told its truth, even if alleged facts have been

stretched or ignored. Although most of these tales are straight-ahead fact based, some take a dogleg towards the not-so-factual. You'll know them by the smiles they wear.”

So with that disclaimer, Bill launches into about 30 stories that cover his adventures at home, on the road, and in the air. Most of the pieces are about music – Bill has played with, among others, Tony Rice, Jerry Garcia, Peter, Paul, and Mary, the New Riders of the Purple Sage, Bill Monroe, Darol Anger, the Chambers Brothers, and many other well-known artists. He's played cool jazz, hot swing, bluegrass, newgrass, folk, rock, folk-rock, and just about anything else you can think of. He's played in duos, trios, five-piece bluegrass bands, pit orchestras, and symphony orchestras. Maybe Bill hasn't done it all, but he's done a bunch.

And while he was doing it, he was observing and recording all of it onto his memory. Bill's talent for music is equaled by his ability to capture the essence of an event, whether it's a memorial service for folksinger and Bread and Roses founder Mimi Farina, a gathering of World War II veterans on the 50th anniversary of D-Day, or an amusing scene where a teenage Bill guides a young – and very disoriented – folk artist named Bob Dylan through a backstage labyrinth.

I'm tempted to retell some of the stories here, but that wouldn't be right. I don't want to be a spoiler and can't imagine telling the tales any better than Bill does, so you'll just have to get the book and read it. A random listing of some of the chapters gives you an idea of what's in store for you.

Jesus Loves His Mandolin Player – On the road with hellacious mandolinist Frank Wakefield

### Paris Remembers

Searching Paris for tortoiseshell picks with Bill Keith, Tony Rice, and David Grisman

### Open Heart – Lou Gottlieb

The Limeliter's Lou Gottlieb illuminates the old song, “Oh Danny Boy”

### Great Spirit

A heavenly belly dance gig at Lake Tahoe

### Laying Buddy Down

Buddy Bolden, the first man of jazz, is laid to rest 65 years after his passing

The subtitle of Acoustic Stories is “Pickin' for the Prez and Other Unamplified Tales.”

This particular story, about playing a gig for President George W. Bush, is the heart of the book and Bill is at his best relating the details of encountering the elaborate security gauntlet that surrounds the POTUS wherever he goes. Bill's also very honest about the ethical quandary he faced in performing for a politician with whom he disagreed on just about every issue. In the end, he decided to play because it was – “a gig like I'll never see again.”

I think party of his decision came down to pure professionalism – he's a bass player and he had a gig to play. But I also suspect Bill figured he could get a good story out of the experience – and he did.

The gig for the Prez provided a well-stocked pantry of storytelling goodies for Bill, but what impresses me most about Bill's writing is that he's able to whip up a tasty literary treat with whatever's on hand. His attempt to interview Aretha Franklin amounted to a series of oblique, monosyllabic replies from the Queen of Soul, until the subject turned to

astrology. Bill's ability to be in the moment while simultaneously recording a myriad of details allowed him to create a fascinating glimpse into the mind of an entertainment icon from the wreckage of an interview gone bad.

The title “Acoustic Stories” will naturally appeal to bluegrass and folk music fans, and there are plenty of chapters that feature notable figures from these genres. But the term “acoustic” goes beyond describing music. The book's subtitle proclaims “unamplified stories” and that's exactly what you get here. While the author concedes that he's not a journalist and is exercising his right to bend certain facts to the betterment of the story, he isn't laying down multiple tracks or distorting the details beyond recognition or believability.

The stories are all true at their core, and whatever asides Bill throws in to keep the plot moving or embellish the scenery don't detract from the essential truth of what happened. Bill Amateek has been very fortunate to know the people he's met, travelled to the places he's been, and beheld the things that he's seen. But he positioned himself well for the experience by being a talented and versatile bass player, a boon companion, and a keen observer of the wonderful, wacky world of music around him.

Our good fortune is that he's now written a book for us to share his amazing life. And what a book it is. For someone like me, who loves books as much for the package as for the contents, I am truly enjoying the advance copy I received from Bill. It's a high-quality hardcover, cloth-bound tome, printed on heavyweight paper and adorned with many photos. You can find this readworthy book at <http://www.vineyardspress.com> or, by holiday season, at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)