

Bill Harrison Biography

Early Days: Music, Drama and Psychology

In grade school I took accordion lessons because I thought my friend who played the instrument was super cool. I learned a lot about harmony, how to read music, and the geography of the keyboard.

By the time I got to middle school I realized that the accordion was assuredly NOT cool and decided I wanted to play the drums. Sadly, there were already too many drummers at our school, so the band director suggested I start playing the “next best thing” – the double bass. Much to my parents’ chagrin, that’s exactly what I did.

During two summer vacations I had the good fortune to be sent to a theater arts camp, where I got my first taste of being onstage, working on creating a film, learning how to be a DJ at a local radio station and doing various other kinds of performance related tasks.

High School: Music, Theater, Film and Psychology

In high school I was involved in both the “official” theater program (where I got to play bass in my first musical, You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown) and the “alternative” theater company, founded by a some of my edgier friends (where I got to act in plays like Waiting For Godot and The Real Inspector Hound and to direct The Bald Soprano).

In junior year I co-wrote, directed and edited a short film based on the original Star Trek TV series. This was in the pre-home video days; we shot on Super 8mm and used a reel-to-real tape recorder to play back the audio (!) Shortly thereafter I wrote a screenplay called The Day The Flowers Came, adapted from a short story of the same name.

At this time I also began reading books by R.D. Laing, Alan Watts, B.F. Skinner, Erich Fromm and Sigmund Freud. I have no idea where that interest came from but it was there nonetheless.

College I: Film and Jazz

I went to Northwestern University as a putative film major. During my stay there I took drama, psychology and film history classes, hosted a jazz show on WNUR (the campus radio station) and began studying with a bassist from the Chicago Symphony. It was there that I also fell in with a bunch of beatnik jazz musicians and discovered how much fun it was to improvise (among other things).

College II: Music

A few years later I earned a bachelor of music degree in bass performance from DePaul University. There I studied with CSO bassist Warren Benfield, jazz pianist Alan Swain, and arranger/conductor Cliff Colnot, among others. By this time I was playing professionally, both in the jazz world and as a commercial musician (weddings, corporate events, clubs, festivals, recordings). As I was finishing up at DePaul I scored the first of many steady “pit” jobs, playing several shows at the now-long-defunct Candlelight Theater.

Real Life I: Family, Music, Teaching, Drama, and Men's Work

For the next couple of decades I was very involved in raising my family, playing a wide variety of music gigs and teaching music at Governors State University, The American Conservatory of Music) and privately. I composed and arranged music for various jazz groups, wrote “charts” for singers and bands; I even arranged and orchestrated the music for a full-length musical called Fat Tuesday.

At some point I remembered how much fun I'd had being onstage in my early years and decided to enroll in some Meisner-based acting classes at The Actor's Center. (I had the misguided belief that acting would be something good to fall back on if the music thing didn't work out). As a result of the training I received there and at The Piven Theater Workshop I went to a lot of auditions, won a few parts (onstage and in several very small films plus a handful of commercials). I also wrote another screenplay.

Early in the 21st Century I got involved with The Mankind Project, an organization that promotes maturity and emotional growth for men. The seeds of my deep interest in group therapy were planted during this time.

Real Life II: Music, Graduate School, and Psychotherapy

In the last 10 years I've been lucky enough to have done a lot of work in theater orchestra pits, both for national tours coming through Chicago (The Lion King, Wicked, Billy Elliott, etc.) and local productions (at Goodman Theater, Chicago Shakespeare, Marriott Lincolnshire and others). I've also maintained a busy private teaching schedule, including working with students from different parts of the world via Skype.

A few years ago I began to feel that old yearning for “something more” so I decided to go back to graduate school to earn an MA in clinical mental health counseling. I did my yearlong internship at this wonderful non-profit in Hyde Park called The Claret Center, which is where I continue to work professionally today.

Psychotherapy integrates many of the skills and ways-of-being that I've been cultivating for many years. Performing as a musician and an actor, teaching and writing all require building and maintaining connections – relationships – between people. Careful listening, collaboration, improvisation and, most of all, empathy are the skills that are most valuable in working both as an artist and as a therapist. So, in a way, it feels like I've been training to do this work for most of my life.