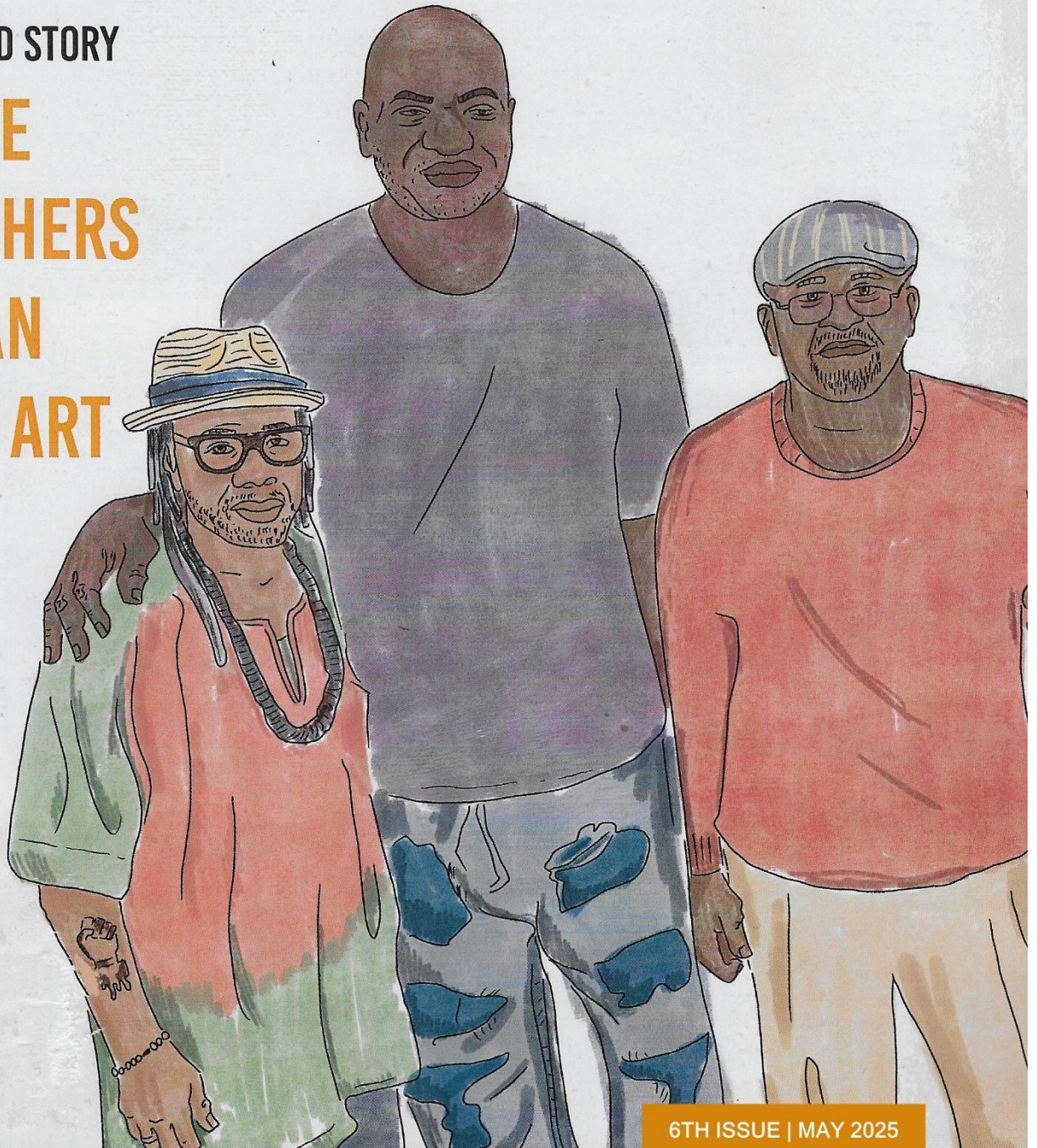


# THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKLORIST

FEATURED STORY

THREE  
BROTHERS  
URBAN  
FOLK ART



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# UNFORGETTABLE

## REMEMBERING PHIL WIGGINS

*Photo by  
Bibiana  
Huang  
Matheis*

BY VALERIE TURNER

Phil Wiggins, a 2017 NEA National Heritage Fellow, was well known for his innovative approach to blowing harp. His talent and passion for playing Blues were unmatched, and his artistry effortlessly spilled into other genres. The bright light he joyfully shined into our world dimmed when his earthly journey ended May 7th, 2024, just one day before his 70th birthday, but his impact on the music world will always be remembered because Phil was a virtuoso and a true master of his craft.

Hailing from Washington D.C., Phil began his musical journey at a young age. He quickly made a name for himself within his community and was no stranger to the local music scene. He was known to area musicians like Archie Edwards and John Jackson, and Phil often performed with artists such as Flora Molton and Wilbert "Big Chief" Ellis. He later became a founding member of the acclaimed acoustic Blues duo Cephas & Wiggins, where he showcased his exceptional harmonica skills alongside Piedmont-style guitarist John Cephas (1989 NEA National Heritage Fellow). Together, they toured the world, sharing their love for Country Blues and African

American history with audiences on every continent except Antarctica.

The duo was well recorded and recognized by numerous prestigious awards. Impressive venues hosted Cephas & Wiggins, including Carnegie Hall in New York City, the Royal Prince Albert Hall in England, the Sydney Opera House in Australia, and the White House in Washington D.C.

Throughout a long and accomplished career, Phil performed with some of the most legendary names in the industry, including Sam Chatmon, Howard Armstrong, and B.B. King. His unique sound and profound musicality distinguished him, earning him respect and admiration from fellow musicians and fans. Although he spent the lion's share of his music career performing with John Cephas, Phil also enjoyed

interesting collaborations with talented artists like Corey Harris, Hubby Jenkins, and Dom Turner, as well as ensembles such as Blues House Party with Junious Brickhouse, Rick Franklin, and Eleanor Ellis. His favorite collaboration was with the Chesapeake Sheiks, a Blues and jazz group consisting of Marcus Moore, Ian Walters, Matt Kelly, Steve Wolf, and Baakari Wilder. He once shared with me that, after decades of playing Piedmont-style Blues, focusing on swing music with the Chesapeake Sheiks kept his creative juices flowing in new and interesting directions. Phil always said that Blues music was dance music and, with that in mind, he incorporated the cutting-edge



tapping and stepping of Bessie Award winner Baakari Wilder and nonprofit Urban Artistry founder and executive director Junious Brickhouse in many performances during his later years.

As a guitar student of John Cephas, I first became aware of Phil Wiggins after hearing his harmonica on the Cephas & Wiggins CDs I'd purchased to further my study of Cephas' fingerpicking style. I admit that I was not prepared to hear Phil's harp featured so prominently, and when we finally met one New Year's Eve when the duo had a performance at the Blue Note in Greenwich Village, I said, "So you're the 'other noise' on those CDs." Fortunately, Phil had a great sense of humor and was very forgiving, and this became an inside joke between us. And that's just how Phil was, completely secure in his ability and generous with his musical gifts. He exuded humbleness, which made him accessible to musicians at all levels. Phil had a knack for elevating any musical situation, and instinctively knew whether to command the moment or add a subtle touch. Because of these qualities, he was much sought after for studio sessions and always welcome at informal jams.

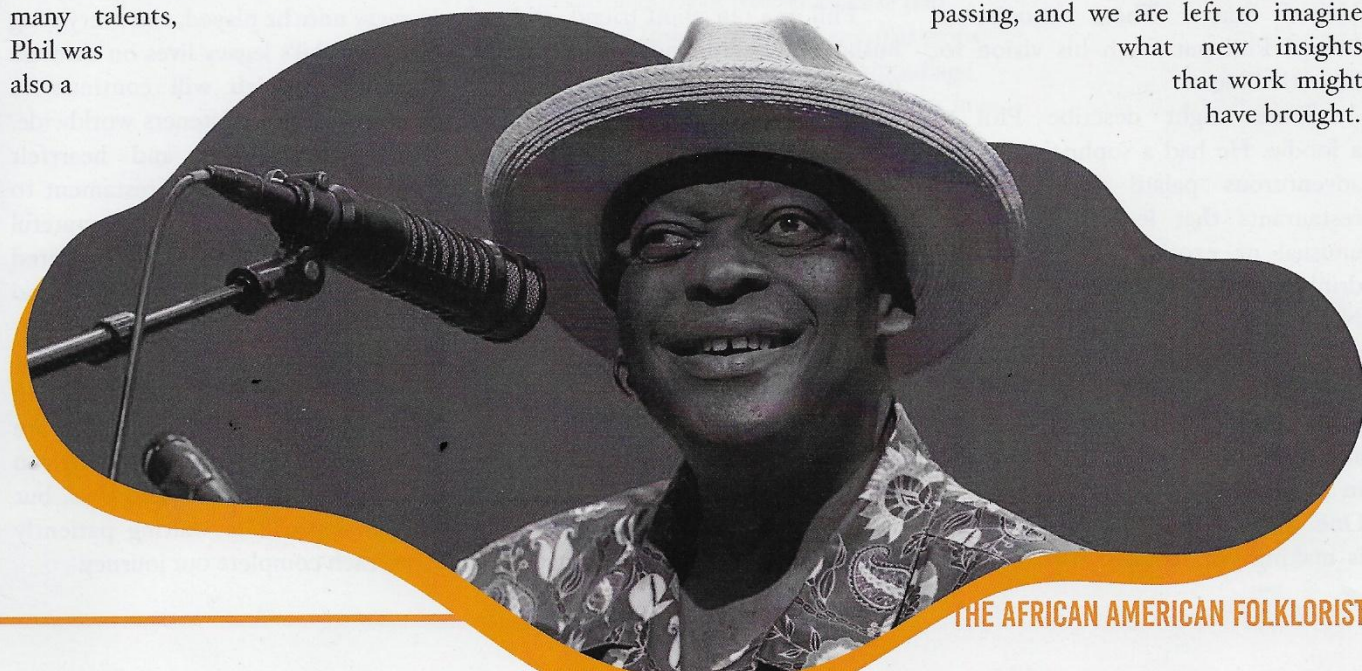
A man with  
many talents,  
Phil was  
also a

gifted songwriter, and from the depth of a song like "Igbo Landing" to the lightheartedness of "No Fools, No Fun," his songs captured the full range of human emotions. In concert, Phil accompanied these and other original songs with rich vocals and griot-like storytelling to transport his audiences across time and through the ups and downs of life—but always ending with positive messages of joy and hope.

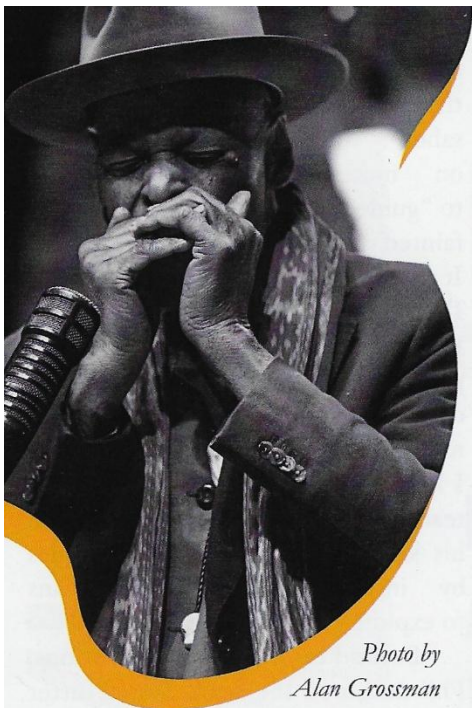
Phil was passionate about promoting acoustic Blues. He mentored countless burgeoning musicians at two of his favorite workshops where he served as Artistic Director: the Port Townsend Acoustic Blues Workshop in Washington State, and Blues Week at the Augusta Heritage Center in West Virginia. Indeed, my first experience performing on a large stage was directly due to Phil. Soon after John Cephas passed in 2009, Phil invited me to honor my mentor by accompanying him on guitar for a song at the Harper-McNeeley Auditorium at Davis & Elkins College. Although I passed through soundcheck with flying colors, I felt paralyzed when Phil called me to join him onstage in front of a full house. His presence was imposing, applause from the audience sounded like thunder, and Phil's bold

harmonica cut through the air like a shining saber. Relying only on muscle memory to guide my fingers, I practically fainted from the adrenaline rush. It was the most exhilarating thing I'd ever done, and, thanks to Phil, I discovered that I enjoyed performing. This was the beginning of many opportunities he offered me as he helped direct my path, and I know I'm not alone. As a dedicated teacher and mentor, Phil passed on his knowledge and passion for Blues by inspiring countless musicians to explore its endless possibilities.

Beyond his musical contributions, Phil authored the book *Sweet Bitter Blues* with his writing partner Frank Matheis of [thecountryblues.com](http://thecountryblues.com), and the two grew very close as they worked together on this project. Published by the University Press of Mississippi, the book offers an insider view of Phil's life in the context of the often-overlooked acoustic Blues scene of Washington D.C. It also includes vignettes, biographies, and interviews provided by Matheis and others about musicians, past and present, deemed important to the evolution of Country Blues. The pair were working on a second book at the time of Phil's passing, and we are left to imagine what new insights that work might have brought.







*Photo by  
Alan Grossman*

As a seasoned artist, it was important to Phil to give back to his community. He served on the board of directors for the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit based in the District of Columbia that strives to spread understanding and appreciation for acoustic Blues. He also served on the board of directors of the National Council for Traditional Arts, another nonprofit organization, dedicated to the presentation and documentation of folk and traditional arts in the United States. These associations helped Phil put forth his vision for acoustic Blues.

Some might describe Phil as a foodie. He had a sophisticated and adventurous palate and preferred restaurants that leaned toward the unusual or exotic, accompanied by drinks made with top-shelf spirits. No stranger to the kitchen, Phil was also a great chef! He was well known for his gourmet skills, especially at the grill, and even offered dry rub classes at some Blues workshops, culminating in a tasty barbecue on the final day. One of my fondest recollections is making potato salad with Phil for

a picnic. His secret ingredient was spicy whole grain mustard, which is now an integral part of our pantry. Phil eagerly anticipated the month of April, which marks the beginning of ramp season. Often compared to wild leeks and spring onions, ramps are known for their pungent and garlic-like quality. Phil enthusiastically shared photos of his ramp cache on social media each spring, shortly followed by mouth-watering images of his “ramptini” creations, a blend of gin and vermouth with ramp juice and ice. We were fortunate to sample Phil’s ramptinis a few years ago and can attest to their deliciousness.

A fun fact about Phil—he was an aquarium enthusiast. Phil carefully curated and maintained five large fish tanks and frequent visits to his local supplier made him a favorite customer. One fish tank was dedicated to fish species from Africa, another was filled with Amazonian fish, and a third tank contained fish from Asia. Two additional fish tanks were home to various tropical species that could coexist. Each tank was a fully functioning ecosystem with decorative hardscapes of African woods and live plants. Watching these graceful swimmers must have been a relaxing pastime.

Phil was our good friend, and my husband Benedict and I feel fortunate to have shared quality time with him. Our home was his whenever he visited New York City and he never failed to pull us into his gigs. The best way to welcome Phil was with prosciutto, fresh mozzarella, good olives, and warm bread. This spread inevitably put him at ease and we were sure to have it whenever he visited. We will always treasure the special memories made while scouring the city for unusual restaurants and bars, visiting custom hat shops, sampling interesting cheeses, relaxing in parks, playing music, and sipping smooth rum by the

fireplace while dishing until sunrise. One of Phil’s guilty pleasures was a good cigar and we made many forays into odd corners of the city in search of the perfect hand-rolled variety. Once found, Phil would buy one or two and squirrel them away until the perfect moment, usually in the evening while sitting on the deck overlooking our garden.

A visit from Phil was incomplete until he filled you in on his pride and joy, his lovely daughters Martha and Eliza from his first marriage. Phil treasured his family, was always excited to share their progress, and was in awe of seeing himself reflected in his grandchildren. Phil was completely dedicated to Judy, his second wife and life partner of over 30 years, whom he met at Augusta’s Blues Week. Family was precious to him and I am certain his spirit will always surround them with love because I don’t believe that a person’s energy can ever be destroyed—it’s just a heartbeat away, in the warmth of a sunbeam, or a whisper on the wind.

Receiving a cancer diagnosis is difficult news but, with his wife Judy by his side, Phil soldiered on and continued living his best life. Those blessed to hear him perform during that time will confirm that his very soul was in every note he played, and every song he sang. Phil’s legacy lives on through his music, which will continue to inspire and move listeners worldwide. His soulful playing and heartfelt performances are a true testament to the power of the Blues. We are grateful for the gift of music that Phil shared with us during his time on Earth, and we hold a special place in our hearts for this legendary harmonica player. Rest in peace, Phil Wiggins! Your music will forever resonate with our souls. We are all walking each other home and you happened to get there before us, but we know you’ll be waiting patiently as we each complete our journey.



Phil hated long goodbyes and magically seemed to vanish at the end of each visit, so this article ends in his own words. The lyrics to "Goodbye Song" were composed by Phil on the occasion of John Cephas' passing. His first performance of the song was in 2009 at the Richmond Folk Festival.

FULL MOON SHINES SO BRIGHT AND HIGH  
THE NEXT NIGHT THE MOON IS ABOUT TO CRY  
ME AND THE MOON HATE LONG GOODBYES  
GOODBYE, GOODBYE, GOODBYE  
GOODBYE, GOODBYE, GOODBYE

WELL THE SUNSET IS SUCH A GAUDY SHOW  
I GUESS THE SUN JUST HATES TO GO  
IF ONLY SHE KNEW LIKE I KNOW  
SO LONG, DRYLONGSO  
SO LONG, DRYLONGSO

WELL I BID FARE THEE WELL TO MY GOOD FRIEND  
I KNOW SOMEDAY WE'LL MEET AGAIN  
AND HE WILL GREET ME WITH A GRIN  
COME IN, COME IN, COME IN  
COME IN, COME IN, COME IN

*Photo by  
Thomas Hjert*

