



Greene native has tickled the ivories for 75 years

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
Staff Writer

Editor's note: Check out our website for a video of Williams playing music in his studio.

A journey Williams' family has lived in Greene ever since his great-grandfather bought the first half of their original 13 acres in the early 1880s—or nearly 140 years. For the past 75, Journey's Piano Tune & Repair has set up shop along Swift Run Road in Ruckersville. He built the workshop himself, and in his younger years he traveled all over the country fixing and tuning pianos for types of clients.

"I reckon I was about 12 when we first got a piano, and Mama wanted my sister to play," Williams recently recalled. "I was the driver in the house at that time, so I had to drive her to Charlottesville on Saturdays to take her music lessons. I decided I was going to do some along with her."

The family got the piano from a cousin in Washington, D.C., and a friend who hauled cows from Baltimore helped move it to the house in Greene.

"After the piano got to the house, I played the piano every day," Williams said. "Daddy kept us in the field all the time on the farm, (so) I had to play at lunchtime. I started learning, and I'd pick up a sound from anybody I could. I wish I could've had more music."

Williams dropped out of school in the seventh grade to help take care of his dad and started picking up jobs all over the county as a handyman. He later worked in a factory for a manufacturing company and also did deliveries, drove a truck and learned carpentry and bricklaying. All the while, he continued practicing his piano whenever he had a spare moment.

"I can read some songs," he said. "I didn't really study music long enough, but all the songs that I learned I can (still) play. I learned a whole lot of music just by looking at it, finding what key it's in, and I learned the rest of it on my own."

Over the years, Williams has played in churches in just about every county in Virginia. He played for Shiloh Baptist Church in Stanardsville in the 1970s and 1980s and directed the church choir for more than a decade, and later played for Evergreene Retirement Community.

He got into the repair and tuning business after another practitioner told him he couldn't do it.

"I got an old piano in the shop and I started piddling with it ... I took it all the way down to nothing," he said. "I was having a hard time with it, so I called Richmond Piano Rebuilders and asked them some questions. I wanted to get it back together, but they asked me what I'd done to it and I told them ... they said it's unfixable—you can't fix it. Just throw that one away and get you another piano. For some reason I didn't listen to that; I just kept fooling with it and kept on working on it until I started getting it back together myself ... working on it and praying—I just wanted to do it."

After working on the "unfixable" piano for a long time, Williams eventu-

ally got it back into playable condition.

"I just kept on going and eventually it started coming to me," he said. "I had some songs I wanted to play so eventually I started learning how to tune it. I got it back together and tuned it, but I don't know how I managed to do that—I'd hate to have to try that again. ... The Richmond Piano Builders, they wouldn't give me no help; but I kept going and I got it done—with the help of the Lord, I reckon."

When he was finally finished working on the piano, it was in tune. Journey started practicing the two songs he really wanted to play—"Blueberry Hill" by Fats Domino and "What a Friend we have in Jesus," an old Christian hymn. Some of his friends started to nag him about playing at a talent show that was going to be held at William Monroe High School, and Williams went up to the school to ask the teacher's permission to enter the show.

"She asked me, could I do it? I told her I had already learned how to do it. She said it's got to be in tune and I said I'd already tuned it. And she says, well bring it on," Williams recalled. "We got it on a truck and carted it up to the high school and we moved (their) piano and put my piano in place of it. Everybody said it was good—I went on and played in the show."

Although he had now repaired and tuned one piano, it hadn't yet occurred to Williams that he could make a profit in this line of work. While working on another construction job, he got to talking about the piano and another gentleman asked how much he would charge to tune a piano; he said \$15.

"He said he had an old piano at the house and if you come up there and tune it, I'll give you \$10," Williams said. "So I went up there and stayed about half the night—I wasn't too good at it but I stayed up about half the night and we got the old piano tuned. I don't know how I done it, to tell you the truth—I tuned the piano without any equipment, just a hammer and playing on it."

Williams made \$10 for his first official piano tuning job. Little did he know he would end up spending most of his life making a living off of his passion.

"I don't know how in the world I ever tuned a piano with all them strings singing," Williams said, explaining that professional piano tuners generally use a wedge to dampen the strings on either side so you can clearly hear the one you're working on. "I got pretty good at tuning the piano. I could only tune it one way and that was the right way."

When asked how he found the right tone without any sophisticated equipment, he just points up to the Lord and smiles.

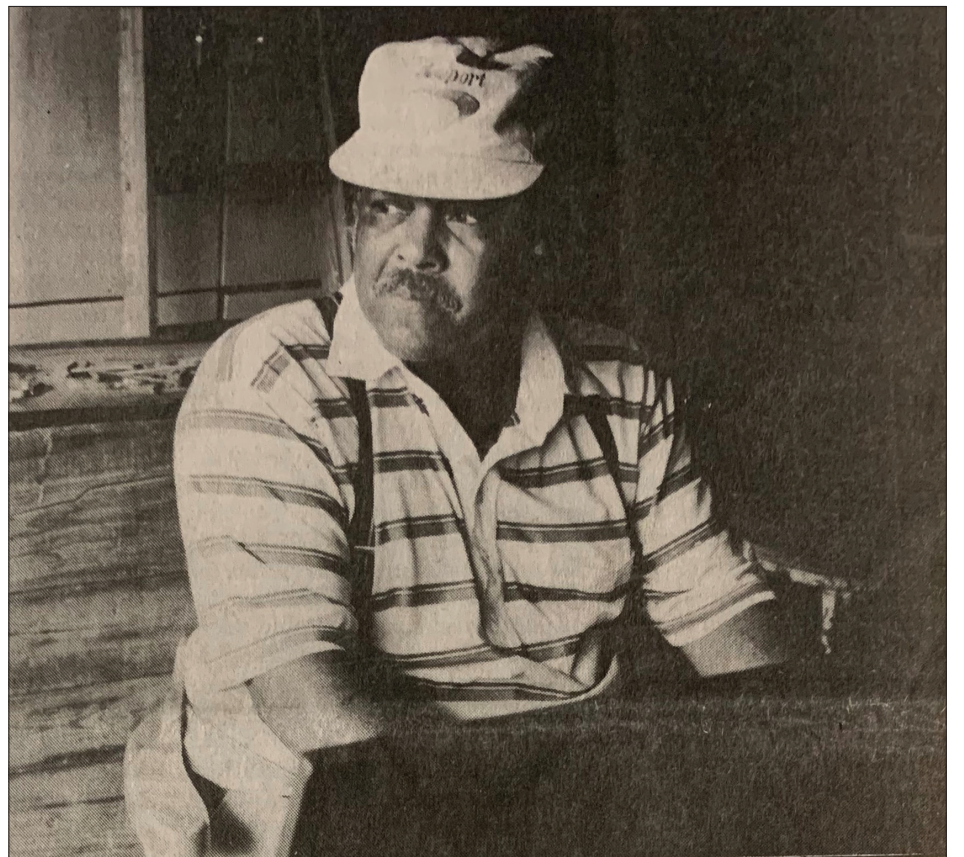
Williams eventually sold the piano he had carted up to the school—for a nice profit. He began to travel for work, taking every opportunity to visit piano stores and music stores and learn anything and everything he could.

"I went to a guy's piano store in Harrisonburg and me and him got to be very good friends," he said. "I was trying to find out some things and he said, 'Journey, you've got to have some



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Aljourney Williams plays Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill" at his piano repair shop in Ruckersville. At 87 years old, Williams has been playing for nearly 75 years.



FILE PHOTO

Williams played the same song for a Record reporter in 1992. He started playing at 12 years old and began his own piano tuning and repair business several years later.

equipment and parts and stuff like that.' He helped me a whole lot and he gave me a handful of little parts and things."

In addition to his first set of tools and parts, the store owner told Williams where to get booklets for ordering parts when he was working on a job. Every time he finished fixing a piano and sold it, he would get another one and start all over.

"People will just give them to you—old pianos," he explained. "I'd start stripping them down and refinishing them and just getting better all the time. After I really learned I could do

it, I went up and asked the judge, did I have to have a license to tune pianos for people?"

The judge in Greene at that time was very familiar with Williams and his family.

"He said, 'Can you do it, Journey?' and I said, 'I'm doing it.' He said, 'Do you do a good job?' I said, 'I'm doing a good job.' And he said, 'Well, get some cards made and just go ahead and do good work,'" Williams recalled. "He said, 'As far as I can remember, nobody in the history ever lived in Greene

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SPECIALS

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Journey

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County to tune no piano. If you tune piano, you're the first one that ever did it in Greene County.' So I just kept going."

Williams has suffered from narcolepsy all his life. He used to fall asleep in school, and often had to move from job to job because of his tendency to fall asleep on the job. Luckily, he often found himself working for employers who would forgive the occasional nap in return for a job well done.

"I had a hard time with [the narcolepsy] but I just did the best I could with it and people trusted me," he said. "We farmed, and when I got sleepy, I just had to take a nap, whatever I was doing. If I was helping my daddy farm or I was playing or whatever I was doing, I'd just say stop the horses and sit down, and that's what I had to do the rest of my life—just sit down and take a nap and then get up and go ahead."

Williams said he believes the Lord was looking out for him, because he never got in a car accident or fell off a roof during a job.

"I played piano for the church and I never did have that problem—I never did fall asleep in the church, for some reason," he said.

At one time, Williams found himself working for Peter Daly, who was the manager of Greene County Economic Development Corporation. While helping to build shelters and restrooms to help underprivileged people in the county, Williams found himself telling Daly all about himself and his condition.

"And he said, there's help for people like you—did you know that?" Williams said. "He said I'm going to tell you what

you need to do because you know too much to not be able to survive by yourself ... I'm going to give you (someone's) number because you need a workshop."

Daly put Williams in touch with the gentleman who was in charge of applications for disability assistance in the county. After meeting with the man and going through medical screenings to get approved, Williams was able to get financial assistance setting up his business.

"He got me through and set me up for my tools and I acted like a dummy and asked him could I build the shop, but they got me through that and let me do it," he said.

Daly kept checking in on Williams over the years, giving him contact information for a local lumber company to get the supplies for his shop. He started out building picnic tables and other furniture items, but kept coming back to pianos.

"I started getting good at that, so I stopped doing the other stuff and started working on pianos," he said. "I named myself Journey's Piano Tune & Repair and I've been doing it ever since."

One client out of Wolftown said he had heard Williams had an ear for music and asked if he could come take a look at his baby grand piano. Despite having hired two college students who were trained piano technicians to tune the instrument, he still felt something didn't sound quite right.

"He was a real musician—he had albums and all that—but he said something still didn't sound right in that piano," Williams said. "He lived way up in the mountains and when I went in the house he had the most beautiful baby grand piano—I'd never seen anything like it. He played it and then I played it, and—Lord have mer-



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

You can enjoy a video of Williams playing in his studio on the *Greene County Record's* website (www.greene-news.com) as part of the online edition of this article.



cy—I said I reckon I done met my match now. That piano was about the most perfect piano I ever played in my life."

Journey said he couldn't see a thing wrong with the grand piano, but at the owner's insistence he agreed to stay and take a look inside.

"I turned it down out of tune and then I sat there and tuned it back up," he said. "I had a tuning fork but very seldom will I use a tuning fork, so I sat there and just re-tuned so I could play my stuff like I play. I just worked on it until I knew it was right."

The owner came back the next day and demanded to

know how Williams had fixed what was wrong with the piano, but Williams just said he tuned it up to the best of his knowledge. He still doesn't know what was "wrong" with that particularly lovely instrument.

Williams is 87 years old now and he can no longer drive due to his health and declining eyesight, but he's still repairing and tuning pianos locally.

"This could be a powerful piano if somebody just knew," he said of one of the antiques in his workshop. "Instead of buying a new piano, they can buy this piano and it just needs new strings and new key

tops on it. ... I got so now I can't see, but you don't have to see to tune a piano; you don't have to see to play. Every key's got a tune to it but you have to find it. You've got to keep on living—you can't stop."

To reconfirm the words of a *Record* reporter from 1992, "he still plays a mean version of Fats Domino's 'I found my thrill on Blueberry Hill.'"

For anyone interested in purchasing one of the refurbished pianos in Journey's workshop, you can contact him via his daughter at (434) 242-2785 or stop by the shop on Swift Run Road in Ruckersville.