

May 9, 2010—

William Mason "Bill" Prine was a tool and die maker in the western suburbs from the 1930s through the early 1970s. The rugged native of Paradise, Ky., had migrated north with his bride Verna to make a better life.

After his shift, Prine would adjourn to the front porch of his frame house on First Avenue in Maywood. He'd enjoy a quart of Old Style beer, with a second one for safe keeping in the freezer. He worked hard.

And then he would watch the world go by.

He felt the muscle of every passing dream.

"There was no interstate when we were growing up," his songwriter son John Prine recalled last week during a break from an Ozarks fishing trip. "First Avenue was a major route for semitrucks and traffic traveling north to south to avoid the city. I'd lay in bed at night and watch the headlights. Growing up on a four-lane highway, it was like a river. There was always something going on. We'd have all our talks with our dad on the porch."

Bill Prine had a fatal heart attack on that porch in 1971. He was 56 years old. Prine gently references that hot August day in his 1973 ballad "Mexican Home."

Chicago's most acclaimed singer-songwriter returns to his hometown this week for two shows at Proviso East High School. The shows benefit the Maywood Fine Arts Association and are being filmed for a Prine documentary, which will also include the Chicago Sun-Times' Roger Ebert, who first wrote about Prine and the timeless Earl Pionke, owner of the Earl of Old Town nightclub.

Prine is also the subject of two new recordings: "In Person and On Stage," a compilation of live recordings due May 25 on his Oh Boy label, and the tribute album "Broken Hearts & Dirty Windows," out June 22 on Oh Boy.

Prine was born in Maywood and attended Proviso East, as did all his brothers: Doug (a

retired Chicago policeman), Dave (who taught John how to play guitar in 1962) and Billy (a Nashville-based musician in his own right).

Prine's father and mother arrived in Maywood from western Kentucky, where Verna's father ran a ferryboat on the Green River. The Prines rented the battleship-gray house on First Avenue for nearly 40 years. The house is still standing about a block away from the high school. Prine hopes to include the house in the documentary.

Proviso East opened in 1911 and has also produced luminaries such as Boston Celtics coach Doc Rivers, the late talk show host Mike Douglas and comedian Dennis Franz.

"I could see the school clock [tower] from my bedroom window," said Prine, who graduated from Proviso in January 1965. "I was late every day. I used to keep a pair of shoes by the side of the bed. My mother would holler because she didn't want to climb upstairs and drag me out of bed. I'd go 'Yeah, I'm up.' Then I'd lean over, move my shoes along the floor like I was walking. And then roll over and go back to sleep."

Prine's father even attended Proviso East. The story begins in the frisky 1973 Prine ballad "Grandpa Was a Carpenter."

"That was my father's dad," Prine said. "He'd move his family to wherever he was doing jobs. My grandfather built the bank building on 4th at Madison in Maywood. My dad went to 12 different elementary schools because of his father's work. All up north because that's where the better jobs were."

The Grammy-winning songwriter had called from the parking lot of a Wal-Mart Super Store in Arkansas. It was the only place in town with a strong signal. He had been catching rainbow trout with four friends. "I've been coming to this same place since I was 14," he said.

The diversity of Maywood helped Prine find his way in life's rougher streams.

His father was a regular reader of the Sun-Times and Chicago Daily News. John heard his favorite songwriter, Chuck Berry, on neighborhood jukeboxes and would come home to absorb the Hank Williams Sr. and Spike Jones records from his father's collection.

"Maywood stuck out because it was integrated," Prine explained. "Later on, especially when I got in the Army, I was glad I grew up in that situation. I was with kids from

Mexico, black kids. Some guys had never been away from home and were used to wherever they grew up. Maywood was a mixture of everything. Melrose Park was on one side and that was Italian American. Forest Park, back then, leaned toward German Americans and Polish Americans.

"You can tell by the restaurants.

"Oak Park? To Maywood it was where the rich people lived. In River Forest everybody would point out [mobster] Tony Accardo's house. We'd ride by it on our bicycles."

Prine did his first benefit for the Maywood Fine Arts Association in 2000. More than 1,400 students learn piano, dance, hip-hop, tap dance, drama, drawing and other art disciplines at the school building, 25 N. Fifth Ave. The building's dance studio caught fire on March 12, and a recovery fund has been established. "There's no charge for their programs," Prine said. "These kids would never have this opportunity otherwise."

After the 2000 concert, Prine told his longtime manager Al Bunetta that the event should have been filmed. Prine reasoned, "I told stories from the stage about songs I wrote growing up. I told them if the song idea pertained to the Maywood area. It was stuff you normally wouldn't go into in Pennsylvania or Florida. I saw people I hadn't seen in years. My whole gymnastics team was there. I had never been to a high school reunion, so I never knew the feeling of walking into a room and seeing faces 35 years later. It was a pleasant surprise.

"So this time we're doing it again and filming it."

The documentary will include remembrances from all his brothers taped in Prine's Butcher Shoppe recording studio in Nashville. Prine will also lead a hometown tour similar to what he did in 1980 on WTTW-Channel 11's "Soundstage."

Prine's rich rhythms and witty wordplay echo the late country singer Roger Miller, whom Prine discovered through "Dang Me," the 1964 crossover hit that was popular while Prine was at Proviso East.

"I remember this gorgeous girl," Prine said. "She was so pretty the word was that she only went out with college guys. My senior year I'm sitting behind her in art class. She had a voice like Marilyn Monroe, real soft. She turned around and said, 'Hi Jimmy.' I went out with her for four months and never corrected her. I didn't care what she called

me. I let her call me Jimmy. She said to me one day, 'You remind me of that guy on the radio.' And I said, 'What guy is that?' She was talking about Roger Miller's goofy sense of humor. Because she was interested in me and I reminded her of him.

"I became a huge Roger Miller fan."