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Performer Profile

Joseph “Leo” Bailey – Strumming Right Along

As a young boy growing up in Rhode Island, Joseph “Leo” Bailey bought his first instrument, a guitar, from the son of a customer to whom he was delivering vegetables. He learned to play with the help of an uncle who also played the guitar. “My uncle wrote down a couple of chords – C, D and G – and said he would check back in a couple of weeks,” Bailey remembers. “Well, he came back in about three weeks and I played for him and he said, ‘From here on I’ll listen to you.’” Bailey progressed to the saxophone, chromatic harmonica and vibes, and started his long love affair with performing, first as a teenager and later in the Navy.



On December 2, 1998, Bailey’s days of playing music almost came to an end. While finishing a woodworking project, Bailey severed the four fingers on his right hand on a table saw. Doctors attached the fingers, but the remarkable part is that Bailey was able to regain full motion of his fingers through two years of intense physical therapy, and undoubtedly, his steadfast desire to play music again. “I couldn’t even hold my guitar pick after the surgery,” he said. “It’s all in your spirit. If you work hard at something you love, you will find a way.”

“It was sort of a happy accident,” Bailey says about his accident because it introduced him to the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. He first performed at the annual event in 2001, strumming his beloved 1957 Fender Jazzmaster guitar to achieve a gold medal. The Creative Arts Festival has lead Bailey, a World War II veteran, to began performing with his group, *the Band of Brothers*, at veterans’ stand downs – grassroots intervention programs that help homeless veterans cope with life on the streets. “I’ve been playing at stand downs for about three years now,” Bailey says proudly. “We bring in the vets, feed them, give them a place to sleep and entertain them.”

Being a musician wasn’t the only way Bailey made a living. “Back east I worked in the steel mill for U.S. Steel,” he recalls. “Then, in 1968, I moved to California to become a layout guy at a newspaper known as the Green Sheet.”

Music has always been a part of Leo Bailey’s life, though. So it’s no surprise that the instruments that he has given life to over the years have helped him keep joy and passion in his. At 82, Bailey has no intention of putting his guitar away. “I’ll keep on playing for as long as I can,” he said.