

# NPR Interview

Made by Terrence Dowling in preparation for a profile in the television program "West Coast Journal" for NPR TV station WEDU in Tampa.

**Terry:**

**Can you give us some idea how music and poetry fit into your overall career and life as an artist?**

**Bill:**

Music fits in an integral and central way, because my entire professional activities are involved with self-expression. I've spent pretty much my whole life trying to learn as much as possible about the process of self-expression and how it works and trying to figure out how to orient myself and my life so I could express myself as much as possible through my art, my music and my life. I am always trying to capture the poetry of the moment. Whatever type of artwork I am trying to make, whether it's a painting, a musical piece, or whatever, I am trying in fact to make a poem. So if I'm playing music I'm trying to make a poem in music; if I'm making a painting I am trying to make a visual poem. And that idea of a poem is the idea of bringing order out of chaos, of making sense out of the day's emotions and the different impressions that one takes in ... of putting some kind of order and meaning into life through art. And of course this idea is very much the idea of music ... creating order, striving for beauty, and, in jazz, doing so in a spontaneous way.

**Terry:**

**So you would describe yourself as an artist for whom making art is a musical activity?**

**Bill:**

Right, for me making my paintings is no different than playing the piano. It's a similar type of art. It involves different technical movements, but it's all about creating music, which is to say creating a mood of harmony.

**Terry:**

**Was there ever a time in your life when you weren't painting or drawing?**

**Bill:**

Playing music, painting and drawing are just like breathing to me. It's just something I normally do. If you leave me alone in a room for any length of time I will be drawing, painting or making music. When I went to the New England Conservatory I spent seven years doing around-the-clock music. Up until that point I had always been painting, drawing and studying art. So after seven years of doing nothing but music the trail was quite cold when I took up visual art again. Fortunately, at that exact moment, I met a wonderful man in California named David Pacheco (who has since passed away) who turned out to be a kind of genius of art and a genius at teaching what he knew. When I decided to get back into art as a professional field David saved me about twenty years of trial and error in the few short sessions I had with him.

**Terry:**

**Can you remember how you were drawn to painting and music as a child?**

**Bill:**

Well, I know with music. I remember it was when I went to summer camp? Schroon Lake Camp in upstate New York. The first time I ever heard anything like jazz on the piano. There was a guy there playing ragtime. I probably was about eight and a half years old and that music just grabbed me right by the nape of my neck. I didn't know what type of music it was and I didn't have the opportunity then to even find out what it was, but as soon as I heard that I could

imagine doing it. But I think it was really recordings that I heard as a child that really flipped me out. There was one in particular by Florian Zabach called "The Hot Canary". You probably don't remember that one. He was a virtuoso violinist, a Hungarian violinist doing the most extraordinary things with a violin. I think hearing virtuoso performances and hearing really powerful performances made a great impression on me in my childhood. The power of the music appealed to me, that you could get that much emotional power into something. It rang a bell within me and made me think that's what I'd like to do too.

**Terry:**

**How about that in terms of art? Do you recall being moved visually by what you saw? Visually in terms of drawing and paintings or was it a feeling you wanted to express?**

**Bill:**

My mom used to take me to the museums in New York. We lived in upstate New York and we used to go regularly to the city, particularly, to the Museum of Modern Art. I was about eight. We got all their (MOMA) publications in our house as they came out. That was the time when American art was really hitting the screen worldwide and it was the moment when the Abstract Expressionist movement was what was really happening. I used to peruse those catalogues like comic books, and marvel at the art and read all about the concepts. I think the impression made on me was so natural because I didn't particularly consider it to be anything special. This was just simply what was really interesting in the world, thinking about painting, thinking about space, thinking about light, thinking about color, thinking about shapes. When I hit my teen years I discovered that this was something I could do, too. It was just a natural form of expression for me but I was lucky to be presented with the finest there was and is in terms of art as a regular diet through my youthful years. It gave me an idea what good art is all about.

**Terry:**

**You mentioned figure painter Fletcher Martin who you studied with.**

**Bill:**

Wherever I travel in the world I meet other people who studied with Fletcher. Fletcher Martin was a renowned and revered figure in American art and art teaching who was a family friend. He also taught in Europe. I met someone who studied with him in Paris. He was a top figurative artist in America in the 1940's. During World War Two, he was one of four painters who were doing artwork for the military in the field under combat conditions. So that gives some idea of his ability to draw spontaneously under pressure. Somewhere around here I have a copy of Life Magazine from the 40's with a painting of his of a scene from World War II on the cover. He was a top skilled artist and teacher and he happened to teach at the Albany Institute of Art which was where my mother was studying with him. I started taking drawing classes with him when I was about sixteen. He got me started on the absolutely right foot straight from the beginning.

**Terry:**

**He was a figurative painter. Obviously abstract art has also become really important to you. Do you do both and is that unusual in the art world to do both? Or do people usually do one or the other?**

**Bill:**

I was talking with an abstract artist yesterday, a metal sculptor, who, even though her stuff is very abstract, always makes her sculptures with the figure in mind. And I know de Kooning's paintings, for example, morph very easily between the figure and abstraction. So I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of abstractionists do have the figure in the back of their mind. I certainly do. When I arrived at the School of Fine Arts at Cornell University in 1964 all the teachers were teaching the gospel of "abstract expressionism". Unfortunately, although they were experienced artists, none of them seemed to know how to convey much of what they knew or had experienced. So it was actually a very confusing and disappointing time for me.

People looking at abstract expressionist paintings think that it must be very easy. Well, anybody who's really tried it knows it is the most difficult form of painting there is. I discovered that rapidly at college. All these abstract paintings I had seen in my teen years in museums and books, I thought I'd just be able to sit down and do something like that but I couldn't. That was very discouraging; and I wasn't able to find anybody who could help me with the problem. It took quite a few years of study and fortunate meetings with other artists and creative people, and conversations late into the night, and a lot of research and experimentation on my own before I began to really understand the operations that go into making good abstract paintings.

**Terry:**

**Does it matter to you whether someone looking at your paintings gets what you are trying to do?**

**Bill:**

Well that's a very interesting question. I have learned that what other people get out of my paintings isn't necessarily the same as what I put in them but they may get something out of me paintings that I didn't know was there. On the other hand I've had the experience of doing completely abstract paintings, then giving them a title, and having someone come up and use the same words that are in the title to describe the picture! So I have learned that the language of abstract painting is a universal language like music. And people that are sensitive to it and can read it can definitely get the message.

**Terry:**

**Do you think you could refer to the painting over your shoulders and give us a little bit of an idea about what it is and how you came to compose it?**

**Bill:**

This painting is called "Mambo" and actually there is a dancing figure there. Of course, it makes perfect sense that there would be since for me the making of a painting is always a kind of a dance. You might be able to see even more than one figure. The painting is literally the result of the feelings and movements that are taking place in my mind and of the movement of my brush, the instantaneous connection between thought and action.

**Terry:**

**How about the first time you sold a painting? How did that feel?**

**Bill:**

The first time I sold a painting was a great experience. It was actually at my first exhibition. At a local café in Copenhagen I exhibited some paintings which represented a great deal of conceptualizing on my part but which I wouldn't show a soul today. I put a price on them of about \$150 each and a fellow came in within a couple of weeks and bought one of them and said "do you mind if I come to your house and see what else you have?". So he came to my house. I had set my house as it is to this day, as a gallery of my work. He came and picked out ten more paintings off the walls and bought them and left within an hour and left me in a state of absolute amazement. That was very encouraging. This was just a café exhibition and I'd done pretty well. So after that I decided I would exhibit my paintings anywhere that anyone would have me which turned out to be a good idea. Soon after I exhibited in another café and that led to my first exhibition at a real gallery.

**Terry:**

**Your European experience was extensive. Did you find Europe to be much more comfortable and stimulating as far as art is concerned?**

**Bill:**

When I went to Europe in 1981 I went there to have a new experience and also with the idea that I might like to live over there. The experience turned out to be immensely valuable. It enabled me to plumb the depths and origins of the forces of the culture that had formed our modern ideas of art, and in particular, the two eras of art that I find most interesting, the Renaissance and the Modernist eras. Living in Denmark, Holland and France for over twenty years and traveling widely I was able to penetrate into the roots of these movements through my first hand encounters with the art and the European way of living. Surprisingly this gave me insight into the history of painting and it made it more possible for me to imagine what the life was like and the context in which these periods of artistic development took place. My experiences in Europe enriched me more than I had ever have imagined possible and gave me a firm foundation upon which to develop my own art, not to mention it was also a lot of fun and very beautiful!

Another important aspect of experiencing life in Europe is to see how art and architecture and music are much more integrated into daily life than in America. In Europe your "everyday" person is much more informed about art and music, much more likely to buy a painting. They are remarkably much more knowledgeable about jazz than most Americans, which is really a pity. And the daily life and environment are also, I would have to say, very aesthetic. The way the environment is taken care of, the way history is respected, this creates an atmosphere, a human environment, which, in many ways we should learn from in this country. And I actually do think we now are. International attitudes are becoming more prevalent.

**Terry:**

**What do you enjoy most about your role as an instructor of art and drawing as opposed to being a performer or painter?**

**Bill:**

I love teaching art for many reasons. One of them is I think art is very accessible for people. If you want to learn to play a musical instrument you can plan on several years of work before you're going to get much of a reward whereas art you can, more or less, have a wonderful experience the same day you start and get a lot of excitement and development out of what you put into it. So I love that instant feedback you have and the accessibility. It is just a wonderful opportunity to explore with other people "the various parameters of the self" what we are, who we are, and how we operate. When you get a paint brush in your hand it's like a seismograph and it records things. That experience and what happens that's the spontaneous moment. Frequently the most amazing experience is with the students with the least experience, the least knowledge and familiarity with art, they sometimes do the best. A lot of it is about breaking down preconceptions and I love breaking down preconceptions. It's a great fun process to go through together.

**Terry:**

**You give classes drawing the nude. What is the most interesting aspect about drawing from the live model?**

**Bill:**

Recently I was looking at some of my earliest paintings that I did as a teenager and I was surprised to see how many of them were of nudes even at that age. I realized that I have always been very fascinated with the human figure and particularly the female figure and I think the reason is that I am fascinated with beauty. There is a famous expression that was originally uttered by the Roman architect "Vetruvius" that "Man is the measure of all things", but when it comes to the ideals of beauty then I think it is "Woman" who "is the measure of all things beautiful". So drawing the female figure is an opportunity to learn about the canons of beauty, to learn about the glories of form, and the nuances of human life. The human figure is where all the information is Many other artists have felt the same way. If you read the writings and thoughts of Michelangelo and Rodin, and many others you'll find them in agreement that the human figure is where to learn how art works and how form works. It's a study that is endlessly challenging and

endlessly developmental and is never the same from one day to the next.

**Terry:**

**Can you talk about who takes part in these life drawing classes and what their skills and background might be?**

**Bill:**

Well, there's no question that most people who do think about drawing and painting would love to be able to draw the human figure. It's very attractive, I think, to all artists. However, everyone who wants to do it is frequently stopped when they try to do it because they find out it doesn't work out the way they want it to. My job as a teacher is to really reveal that it's not as hard as people think if you actually have the right tools and techniques, in other words, if you know how. So that's what my classes and workshops are really about, finding out that if you approach it the right way the mysteries of drawing the figure become less mysterious.

**Terry:**

**Can you talk about this in terms of your abstract classes and workshops as well?**

**Bill:**

Of course the same would be true in regards to doing abstract painting as well (about approaching it in the right way). There is a lot of technique involved there, too. But the problem is that when you are working from something concrete and representational it's a little easier to talk about and define what it is you are trying to accomplish. But when you're dealing with abstraction it's always an issue to describe what is fundamental a psychological process. That's the challenge of it and that's the excitement of it too. I try to convey to my students that, if we can just get rid of the preconceptions about what goes into making art and actually just let spontaneous happenings take over, then the most wonderful things can happen on a piece of paper, even for an absolute beginner. The only thing that gets in the way is years of inhibiting influences and thoughts of how the result has to be just right or it has to be this or it has to be that. And really all it has to be is true to the moment.

**Terry:**

**The poetry, the writing, how important and influential is that in terms of you overall life?**

**Bill:**

Well, my mother has always written a lot of poetry and I always admired the things that she wrote. So I began writing poetry when I was a teenager but I had never thought about it even as "writing poetry". It was just something I did sometimes. Shortly after I arrived in Europe in 1981 I was actually writing a lot of poetry. I was just throwing these little notebooks of poetry into a plastic bag. Then, in the late 1980's my studies of art and art history led me to a fact which although well known, had not been apparent to me, namely that poetry was central to the making of art in the Renaissance and particularly in the development of Modernism. I started looking into my own poetry much deeper and I discovered that it was a bigger part of me than I had realized. So I started exploring the making of poetry much more deeply. It was a very good way to learn how to articulate myself. And this approach ended up becoming the foundation of all that I do with music and painting as well. It turns out that poetry is really the essence of art. So, that explains my website logo: "Art is Poetry".