I remember my first Mike Night—a performance by Gilmer County’s Mike Morningstar. I was a student at WVU about 1988. A friend and classmate, Lee Maddex, had been schooling me on music, everything from the Grateful Dead to bluegrass to Frank Zappa. One day, he said, “There’s somebody really good tonight at the Foxfire,” a small pub on Sunnyside. Trusting Lee’s taste in music, I agreed to go. That evening, he and I went to a basement bar that sat probably 25 to 30 people. That’s when I first heard Mike.

I considered myself a folk music fan. I had most of Bob Dylan’s collection, and I’d experienced live music, from great orchestras of the world to Lionel Hampton to Pete Seeger. But the moment Mike started playing, I knew I was in for something different. First, he covered songs I already knew but put his own spin on them and introduced me to ones I didn’t know (the next day, I bought The Byrds’ [Untitled] album because of Mike). Second, that night was the first time I’d ever heard truly personal songs about my home state: “West Virginia Girl” and “Coal Country Blues,” just to name a couple.

I soon realized we had other great homegrown folk singers, like Hazel Dickens, doing their own West Virginia material. But Mike was a first for me. He unlocked a whole world of personal songwriting I could relate to more than I did with Dylan (who I still love). He also was a bridge to lesser-known “story songwriters,” such as Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, and Billy Joe Shaver, who’d become some of my favorites.

I think about why this style of music appeals to me so much. In cswhipkey’s article about Mike (see p. 12), he puts it better than I ever could: “Folk music . . . is created by the people for the people—stories of lives and situations that people live through.”

If you’ve read my column before, those words might sound familiar because that’s how I—and the editors before me—describe GOLDENSEAL. The articles are typically written by our readers for our readers. It’s their own stories and those of others. Mike’s lyrics profile many everyday West Virginians: women and men who’ve worked hard for their families, often suffering through unspeakable tragedies and ending up with next-to-nothing, all the while maintaining a relentless spirit that’s captured in Mike’s West Virginia anthem, “Mountaineers Are Always Free.”

Keep singing and telling our story, Mike. West Virginia needs and deserves a troubadour like you.

Stan Bumgardner
Editor