

Kirk Judd

West Virginia's Spoken-Word Poet

By Dan Kincaid

Kirk Judd may be best known as a poet—one of West Virginia's finest ever—but he's also a performer, a writer, a mentor, an advocate for Appalachian culture, a fisherman and an outdoorsman, a businessman, a computer specialist, an instructor, and on and on.

Even to say he's a poet isn't fully correct. Sure, he's written several hundred poems, a vast collection of traditional and nontraditional verses that cover an array of emotional feelings. Most emanate from his unique perspectives on and experiences with his Appalachian heritage and the sense of place that comes from being a West Virginian. But, more specifically, Kirk is a *spoken-word*, or performance, poet. His readings and oral performances, often accompanied by traditional mountain music, take his poetry to another level. You see, Kirk believes poetry is meant to be heard and not just read. More on this later.

I've known Kirk since the late 1950s. We both attended Westmoreland Grade School and later Vinson High School in West Huntington (Wayne County). Two years younger than me, he was a friend and classmate of my brother Mike. Kirk, always a top student, was valedictorian and treasurer of his senior class at Vinson before attending Transylvania University in Kentucky and Marshall University.

Kirk's earliest influences were his parents, Walter and LaVerne (friends called them "Barney" and "Swede"), who were both avid readers. They encouraged him to read, read, and read more, with nothing censored. As a child, he virtually memorized Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

"I loved reading those poems when I was young," Kirk notes. "They took me to

another world. I guess that is what started me in my love of poetry."

At Vinson, two English teachers, Irene Perry and Joan Townsend, influenced Kirk's love for all types of literature. Kirk was also an athlete at that sports-minded school, lettering in baseball, basketball, and golf. In basketball, he played for Don Smith, one of the most successful coaches in West Virginia history.

In terms of college professors, Transylvania's Stanley Harrison and Marshall's Leonard Deutsch were early influences. Kirk says that at Transylvania, Harrison "let me enroll in an upper-level creative writing course. I had to plead my case and show him some of my writings, but he finally let me in. And it was great. Professor Harrison was a published poet and playwright, and I learned a lot in that class."

"Transylvania was a great school with a fine academic reputation, but after a year, I transferred back home to attend Marshall," Kirk continues. "I took Professor Deutsch's short-story class and after reading some stories that I had written, he actually used a few of them for class discussions. This was a huge encouragement to me."



Kirk as a senior at West Huntington's Vinson High School. All photos courtesy of Kirk Judd.

Marshall creative writing instructor John McKernan invited Kirk to attend meetings of the Guyandotte Poets, and soon, Kirk was a member. "This was quite an honor for a young guy like me to be around and learn from several of these accomplished writers and poets. I can't begin to tell you how much I learned from belonging to that group," Kirk says.

Around that same time, he got married and began to work for Armco Steel in Ashland, Kentucky, where he stayed until 1993. "They don't pay poets very well, so that was how I financed my writing habit," Kirk jokes.

But he never stopped taking classes at Marshall, a few at a time, until by 1990, he'd earned enough credits for a degree in business communications. "I probably had enough credits for two or three degrees," Kirk tells me, "but I never cared about what was required to get certain degrees. I just took courses that I was interested in or in subjects that I wanted to learn more about. Finally, they sat down with me and looked at all of my transcripts and figured out that I had earned a degree in business communications. Who'd have thought?" He laughs.

But along the way, Kirk mingled with many writers and poets. He either joined or helped start a number of literary groups. "This was probably a greater influence on me than the formal courses I took at Marshall," Kirk says.

In the mid-1970s, Kirk was invited to help out with a couple of the first "Hillbilly Festivals" at Morris Harvey College (now University of Charleston), and a fortunate thing happened—he was asked to accompany one of the featured speakers, Jesse Stuart, throughout the festival. Stuart was a famed Appalachian writer from nearby Greenup County, Kentucky.

"You couldn't hang around Jesse Stuart for even a short period of time and not learn something," Kirk says. "He was amazing, and we got along well. My mom and dad had most of his novels, short stories, and autobiographical books. I had read these

growing up. I don't remember reading any of his poems until later in life, though.

"I learned through talking with him that we may have been distant relatives. My folks had their roots in eastern Kentucky, too. Jesse once told me that my great-great-grandfather had shot and killed a man over in Kentucky in the mid-1800s. I never knew for sure if that was true, but it did fit with my family legends. Jesse had a great sense of storytelling."

Other early influences included Shirley Young Campbell, a prominent Charleston writer and editor of *Hill and Valley* magazine. She published a number of Kirk's early writings. "Shirley was definitely a mover and shaker," Kirk says. "In the 1970s, many of us referred to her as the 'godmother of West Virginia writing and literature.'"

Campbell, Kirk, and others, with encouragement from the West Virginia Department of Culture & History (now Arts, Culture & History), were founding members of West Virginia Writers, Inc., which celebrates its 43rd anniversary in 2020.

St. Albans poet Muriel Miller Dressler was also a big influence. Kirk recalls that Dressler was "the first poet that I saw 'perform' poetry. She would recite her poetry from memory with great feeling as she moved around the stage. I thought this was great and the way poetry was meant to be interpreted. We met at the first Hillbilly Festival and became good friends. The title of the anthology of West Virginia poetry that I co-edited, *Wild Sweet Notes*, was taken from a line in Muriel's famous poem 'Appalachia.' The last two lines of that poem are so pure and so true, where she's talking about the things that mountain folk and hill folk know but that outsiders don't":

I am Appalachia: and, stranger,
Though you've studied me, you
still don't know

"Those are some great lines that any West Virginia poet would have been proud to have

written," Kirk says. [See "'Thank You, Lord, I'm Home,'" Renie Carlson's interview with Dressler in our Fall 1983 issue.]

He began reciting his own poetry, mostly at small venues around Charleston in the mid-1970s and was becoming quite well-known in poetry circles. Still, he considered it a surprise and an honor when he was one of five people asked to speak at the 1979 appointment of Pocahontas County native Louise McNeill as our state's poet laureate. "I had read her work while at Marshall, and I consider her to be West Virginia's greatest poet," Kirk says. "She mostly recited her poetry from memory. I was like 27 years old when I first heard her, and this influenced me greatly because if you're going to perform poetry, and not just read it, you have to know it. And by this time, I was convinced that poetry was meant to be spoken and heard, not just read. Louise and I met, and we corresponded. She was a great poet, very eloquent in writing about West Virginia and its mountains. She had met and studied with the great American poet Robert Frost, an indication of her stature in the field."

Kirk had been writing poetry since high school. After taking some courses in Appalachian Studies at Marshall, he began to incorporate that topic into much of his poetry. Around that time, he also reconnected with Mike Bing, a former high school basketball foe from Barboursville. Mike's a member of the Bing Brothers, an old-time music group that received the 2012 Vandalia Award. The two began hanging out together—fishing, hiking, and exploring the state's mountains.

"I sat in on a lot of musical sessions with those guys and the Hammons Family of Pocahontas County, as well as other groups," Kirk says. "One day, the Bings and I were talking about how many of the song lyrics and poetry lines were similar in nature. It kind of dawned on us that we ought to somehow combine the two. Well,

Kirk's "Other" Career(s)

For 42 years (1971–2013), Kirk worked for Armco Steel of Ashland, INCO Alloys and Special Metals of Huntington, and finally with Lockheed Martin as a contractor at both the FBI complex near Clarksburg and in upper management in the D.C. area. Beginning as a laborer at Armco in 1971, Kirk soon moved into laboratory analysis and quality assurance. At INCO and Special Metals, he added duties in safety, training, and the development of project management manuals. At Lockheed Martin, he continued to work in quality assurance and process improvement.

"I did a lot of documentation and report writing," Kirk says. "I would write or edit numerous technical reports and make recommendations to upper management. I had to boil down concepts into understandable language, [which] helped me as an overall writer and gave me the discipline needed in poetry to use the right word in the right place. In my poetry, I try to be brief and concise and, to do that, finding that one correct word . . . is the key. My 9-to-5 job definitely helped me become a better poet."

we did, and I've continued to evolve in my performance and spoken-word poetry with musical accompaniment. It's such a natural fit.

"You know, there are some subtle differences in performance poetry and poetry that is written only. In a way, we're lucky to be West Virginians because there is a certain rhythm in our voices that lends a cadence to our poetry. And it blends beautifully with traditional mountain music. My family's people on both sides were musicians, and I can feel that cadence with my poetry. Somehow, I didn't get that music gene, as far as playing an instrument

goes, but I guess I feel it in my bones when reciting poetry.”

Kirk’s had a great love for the mountains, streams, and people of Pocahontas County for many years. It’s influenced much of his work. He spends as much time as he can at his cabin in Buckeye. As a Pocahontas County native myself (born in Frank), I can certainly relate to much of what he writes and marvel at the insights in his poems.

Kirk’s love of Pocahontas County also prompted him to become involved with the Pearl S. Buck Birthplace Foundation (PSBBF) in Hillsboro; he’s a former president and board member and currently sits on the PSBBF advisory board. This nonprofit group helps preserve the legacy of the Pulitzer- and Nobel Prize-winning author and humanitarian and showcases her 150-year-old birthplace as a fully restored museum. Kirk and fellow board members were instrumental in making Buck’s priceless original manuscript collection available to scholars and the public through the West Virginia and Regional History Center at WVU.

Kirk’s latest poetry collection, *My People Was Music* (Mountain State Press, 2014) with an accompanying CD, is a great example of how Kirk blends spoken verse with traditional Appalachian music. If you don’t have it already, you’ll want to get a copy of this work. It’s outstanding.

Kirk is a complex person, and it’s difficult to cover the entirety of his life and works in a short article. I’ll leave that to a future biographer. But Kirk is gracious and quick to acknowledge others who’ve influenced his work, such as poets Joe Barrett and Bob Snyder, who Kirk calls “giants in the West Virginia literary world”; Gwendolyn Brooks (the first African-American to win a Pulitzer), who first encouraged Kirk to publish his works; Jim Comstock, former editor of the *West Virginia Hillbilly* newspaper, who published a number of Kirk’s poems; members of the Appalachian



Kirk (left) laughs it up with musician, raconteur, and fellow Pocahontas Countian Sherman Hammons, shortly before Hammons’ death in 1988.

Literary League, Soupbean Poets, and Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative; and all his colleagues at West Virginia Writers, Inc.

I’m proud to say I’ve known Kirk since the late 1950s, before he became known as the famous “Kirk Judd.” But, you know, when we talk, we get right to a familiarity that has its roots in Westmoreland, Vinson High School, Huntington, and the West Virginia we all love—the mountains, the streams, and the people. He’s traveled and performed all over the nation and even in Ireland. My career with the U.S. Forest Service also took me all over the country. I often think of the eloquence in one of Kirk’s early short poems *The Comin’ Home*:

I thinks one reason
I be leavin’ alla time
is ‘cause
the comin’ home
feel
so
good.

Amen to that, my friend, and thank you, Kirk, for all your great work over the years (with more to come, I’m sure.) ❁

DAN KINCAID has lived in Pocahontas, Wayne, Kanawha, Wood, and Monongalia counties. He’s written nine books (available on Amazon), eight of which relate to his career as a forester. His three volumes of *Kade Holley*, *Forest Ranger* are fictional stories of adventures while working at national forests, including the Monongahela. This is his second contribution to *GOLDENSEAL*; his first appeared in our Spring 2018 issue.

Kirk's Ongoing Activities

By Dan Kincaid

Allegheny Echoes

This ongoing program emerged from discussions between Mike Bing and Kirk during the Vandalia Gathering in the mid-1990s. Allegheny Echoes—a series of music and creative writing workshops—marks its 24th year in Marlinton in 2020. It's based on Mike's and Kirk's experiences with West Virginia music and poetry. Students come from around the world to attend Allegheny Echoes, which has received financial support from the state Department of Arts, Culture & History, the National Endowment for the Arts, and other sources.

West Virginia State Folk Festival

Sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, Ginny Hawker invited Kirk to perform at our state's oldest annual folk festival. He's thought to be one of the first poets to do so. After his early appearances, the festival added an Oral Traditions tent—hosted initially by Kirk—featuring poets, writers, and storytellers. Kirk continues to emcee the festival's Friday night opening concert.

Augusta Heritage Center

Sponsored by Davis & Elkins College, Augusta focuses on a wide variety of music traditions. Each summer, people come to Elkins to attend workshops and concerts ranging from mountain music to blues to Celtic to zydeco. Highlights include performances by *masters* in their respective fields. Kirk has been a featured poet at Augusta for years and, more recently, became the first poet master during the October Old-Time Week.

Bridgewater International Poetry Festival

This wonderful celebration is in the tradition of the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival—our nation's oldest poetry gathering. Held at Bridgewater College in



Kirk, backed by the Bing Brothers, performs his poetry at Allegheny Echoes.

Virginia, international poets share their work for four days. Kirk was a featured presenter in 2017 and 2018 and will be a presenter and workshop leader again in May 2020.

Blue Planet Memoirs

In 1990, Kirk's good friend Joseph Barrett died unexpectedly, leaving behind a fully developed poetry manuscript. With the permission of Joe's widow, Joanie, Kirk worked with project editor Scott Goebel to publish the volume *Blue Planet Memoirs* (Dos Madres Press, 2018). Since then, Kirk has been criss-crossing West Virginia, reading from this very important addition to our state's literary landscape.

Kirk Judd's Published Works

Field of Vision (Aegina, 1986)

Tao-Billy (Trillium, 1996)

Wild, Sweet Notes—50 Years of West Virginia Poetry 1950-1999, co-edited with Barbara Smith (Publishers Place, 2000)

My People Was Music (Mountain State, 2014) 🌿



Kirk Judd in Beckley, 2014.

Communion Barred Owls Under Bishop's Knob

By Kirk Judd

The tree knows the owls,
Understands their form and shape
In its limbs
Recognizes an absence of absence
When they are there

But doesn't expect them now
In this slant of ocher light
Slipping through the thinning canopy
On the west side of the mountain
An hour before dusk

Nevertheless they've come
Moved by my movement
On this abandoned haul road
They settle side by side in the familiar ash
An old couple on a park bench

They turn to each other
Press their foreheads together
In some ritual of expression
Some eloquence of owlness
A language I almost remember

One turns towards me, the other away
I simply stand in the road
Aware I am in this conversation
But unaware of how to speak
How to join in

I raise a hand slowly
One continues to stare, the other turns to look
I lower it just as slowly
And reluctantly move on
So as not to worry them

Farther up the trail
I suddenly know they were not worried
Nor was the tree, nor the light, nor the mountain
They all merely spoke to me
In an owl moment

I heeded that small ceremony
Witnessed, somehow heard
As I hear now, a slender whispered gratitude
That I passed by
And did not ask for more