



Gene Hoyle with his Martin guitar has played gospel and bluegrass for residents at area nursing homes for years. Now, a resident himself at Orange County Nursing Home, he plays twice a month, usually to a packed crowd.

Photo by Phil Audibert

that C chord just kills me. I don't play as well as I used to. But I don't play bad for an old man."

And he's had some trouble with his other instrument...his voice. Two lymph nodes in his throat grew too big, requiring surgery. "I told that doctor, I said, 'Look, I sing a little bit, I'm not going to sing bass am I?' And he said 'Naw, nuthin' to it.'"

'Well there's sumthin' to it when you cut my throat!' he retorted indignantly.

That was just the beginning of a string of bad luck, both medical and otherwise. First, Gene was diagnosed with prostate cancer, requiring 40 treatments at Martha Jefferson Hospital. On treatment number 35, he blacked out. Trouble was; he was driving his pick-up truck at the time. "The last thing I remember was mashing the gas. And the next thing I remember the safety bag was right here." He points to his chest. "It bruised my lungs, ribs."

That led to pneumonia. And

then he blacked out again as he bent over to pet his dog...slipped, fell and broke his femur. And the day after that cast came off, he fell again and broke his hip. "So, that was getting better, so I was mowing grass one day...and I blacked out again." This time he broke his shoulder. Somewhere in the middle of all this he had quadruple bypass surgery.

And so Gene and Jean decided to sell their home in Montford and move into Orange because



Gene Hoyle is a familiar sight as he rolls down the nursing home corridor back to his room, playing and singing all the while.

Photo by Phil Audibert

he couldn't keep up with the maintenance. To make matters worse, they had put down a deposit on a house on Piedmont Street and had packed up or sold or disbursed of all their possessions, when Jean fell ill. Ten days later she was dead.

That was a year ago August. Gene forfeited the deposit on the house on Piedmont Street and moved into the Orange County Nursing Home, with his guitar, his computer, a mounted eight-pound bass, a huge deer head, a jelly cupboard that he built, a Carolina blue UNC blanket and an aerial photo of his beloved house in Montford.

"I don't even want to look at it," he says bitterly, turning his back to the photo hanging over his bed. "I had everything in this world, but now I've got nothing. I had to sell it all; I couldn't take care of it."

Then Gene Hoyle pauses, brightens and shakes this bad vibe off his shoulders like an old cloak. He wheels his way down the nursing home corridor, playing the guitar and singing softly.

Come Friday night, Biery and Alex and a banjo player and maybe even a guy on bass will all come and accompany Gene Hoyle as he sings, 'I'll Fly Away,' to an audience of mostly adoring little old ladies.

When the shadows of
this life have gone
I'll fly away
Like a bird from these
prison walls I'll fly
I'll fly away

I'll fly away oh glory
I'll fly away
When I die hallelujah
by and by
I'll fly away

I'll Fly Away



Photo by Phil Audibert

Gene Hoyle with his Martin Guitar has played gospel and bluegrass for residents at area nursing homes for years. Now, a resident himself at Orange County Nursing Home, he plays twice a month, usually to a packed crowd.

Some bright morning
when this life is over
I'll fly away
To that home on God's
celestial shore
I'll fly away

I'll fly away oh glory
I'll fly away
When I die hallelujah
by and by
I'll fly away

Several years ago, Gene Hoyle was recuperating in a nursing home in Louisa County when a local minister and his family came in on Sunday morning to preach. And when they saw he played guitar and could sing, they invited him to join them. Gene Hoyle always warms his voice up with the standard gospel song 'I'll Fly Away.' This was no exception.

"Let me tell you something," says Gene peering intently through his thick glasses. "That song is STILL in them walls down there. You ain't NEVER heard anybody sing 'I'll Fly Away' like that."

Gene tells this story from his room

at the Orange County Nursing Home. He has just spent an hour picking and singing to an impromptu audience at one of the nurse's stations. Flipping through his two-inch thick book of song lyrics, he and Gordonsville fiddler, Alex Caton run through the numbers they'll perform on Friday evening. Naturally this practice session started with 'I'll Fly Away.' Confined temporarily to a wheelchair, Gene finds extra inspiration in this song about deliverance. You almost expect him to change the lyrics to "I'll Roll Away," as he shuffles along the hallway back to his room.

Propping the Martin guitar high on

his chest, Gene uses a finger style called Travis picking, where the thumb alternates between bass strings like a metronome while the fingers pluck a counter rhythm. He peers up at Alex with that universal musician's sign that says "take a solo here," and says "Okay, Babe." Tall, blonde and willowy, Alex smiles and obliges.

When they come to the chorus, she chimes in with a high harmony. On another song, a bluesy number named 'House of Gold' he eggs her on. "You gotta go high, you gotta get up there." Later in his room he adds, "I didn't realize she could sing Gospel so good...She picks it up so fast too."

Alex is not the only lady around here who has come under the spell of this engaging fellow. Gordonsville uber-fiddler, the raven-haired almond-eyed Anne Marie Calhoun (see Insider June 7, 2007) has played with him on numerous occasions.

What is it about you and these beautiful women, Gene? He just shrugs, grins impishly and cackles his signature laugh.

Anyway, Anne Marie took Gene's advice to leave her job at Woodberry Forest and accept an offer to tour with Ian Anderson and Jethro Tull. "You're young enough that you can think about your family when you come back," he remembers advising her. He figured that now that she was such a celebrity that would be the last he'd ever hear from her. And so, when the postcard from London arrived, thanking him for the sound advice, he was bowled over. "Money won't buy that card," says Gene proudly.

And how about all the ladies at the Orange County Nursing Home, who outnumber him...five? ten to one? "I'm a popular man over here," he cackles. "I got five that wants me to go home with them and fix their yard." As it is, he tends 16 tomato plants and several rows of flower beds at the Madison Road facility. That, and he runs



Contributed photo

Gene Hoyle and his dad pet two foxhound puppies near their home in Chase City. The time was the mid 1930's. Gene says he inherited his musical ability from his dad who taught gospel singing in church and who sang on the Crewe radio station with a quartet.

errands on a little red motorized scooter, with a bobbing caution flag. "I can go to the Food Lion in five minutes," says Gene confidently. "Eighteen-wheelers stop and let me cross." He's even cajoled a local restaurant owner to give him a good deal when he goes for carry-out for his friends at the nursing home...a familiar sight, him toodling along towing a little red wagon piled high with chicken dinners.

"I'm in demand up here," he says with a tone of a man on a mission. "I thought about going up to Bellview, but I got my work cut out here...I'm probably going to stay here." The Nursing Home's Assisted Living Activities Director, June Dunaway overhears this, rolls her eyes, smiles and shakes her head. "That's just Gene," she seems to say.

Born the son of a general store owner in Chase City near Farmville, Gene Hoyle was surrounded by music, listening to his dad and two uncles sing gospel music in a quartet. "He had two brothers that were just as bald headed as he was...It was comical..., but them boys could sing."

He hauls out a faded, creased photograph of a bald headed man and a little boy petting two foxhound puppies.



Contributed photo

Someone has to be on the mop brigade! Gene Hoyle is the guy on the right. This picture was taken on Guam, where Gene pulled a 25-month hitch with the Air Force after World War II. He later parlayed his ability to type fast and accurately into a 32-year career in communications with the government.



Contributed photo

Gene and Jean Hoyle traveled all over in their motor home to bluegrass festivals, where Gene would often pick and sing till dawn. When not playing music, Gene worked in wood in his spare time, making everything from gun cabinets to pic safes.

In those days, the family car was a 1932 Model A Ford. On Saturday mornings, they'd take the back seat out and load the car to the gunwales with foxhounds and go hunting. Sunday morning, the back seat reinstalled, the whole family went to church to sing their hearts out.

In the background of that photo of him and his dad is the local black community church. Gene remembers, during revival, listening to the music spilling from its open windows and

moved to North Carolina. Gene remembers taking a typing class his last semester in high school, and it turned out to be "the smartest thing I've ever done." He joined the Air Force in 1951, enrolled in teletype school, and was posted on Guam for 25 months working communications. Gene was also a pretty darn good baseball player in those days, until he threw his arm out pitching a wet ball. Had that not happened, he might have gone pro.

With his military hitch up in 1955, Gene returned to his hometown of Chase City, "and got to going with the girl I grew up with and got married." Her name, by the way, was Jean.

One day, this Gene showed up for a job interview at a railroad depot in Crewe. They had just replaced the outdated Morse code

doors. Once, he and his dad were "caught" eavesdropping. "And the preacher saw us and he made us come in and set us down behind the pulpit," remembers Gene in wide-eyed wonderment. "Them dudes could sing."

In fact it was an elderly fellow who introduced a 12-year-old Gene Hoyle to the guitar on the front steps of the country store. "He had an ol' \$5 guitar with a round hole in it. He would come up there on a Saturday night and play that guitar. And he'd take a Coca-Cola bottle and break the neck off, put that piece on his finger and run it down them strings. He played 'John Henry' like you never heard it played before."

In 1947, the family



Contributed photo

Taken in 1985, Gene posed for this photo with his sisters, Mary Lou on the left and Wilma Owen on the right.

telegraph with this newfangled thing called a teletype machine. They didn't even know how to use it. Gene, who could accurately type 100+ words a minute, landed the job instantly. "That's the reason I can type so good, see," he gestures towards his computer in his room at OCNH. "I might be the best typist up here." He's even offered his services to the front office.

The railroad gig lasted nine years. "Then I went to work for the government and I worked Fort Lee and Camp Pickett and then this job up on the mountain." This job up on the mountain...the ultra secret AT&T communications facility not on—but buried in—Peters Mountain. Asked if he can tell what he did up there, he (and all other workers there past, present and future) will abruptly answer "Nope." And he'll say no more.

So, Gene worked shifts up on the mountain, Jean taught at Prospect Heights for 17 years, and together they raised three daughters, Diane, Vivian and Karen. The music bug rubbed off on at least one of these girls; Vivian toured with the inspirational traveling musical show, Up With People back in the 1970s.

Gene kept himself plenty busy during his free time. For one, Gene Hoyle is a heckuva wood worker, building gun cabinets, jelly cupboards, end tables, mirrors, chairs, cradles—you name it. He was a regular fixture at shopping malls and street festivals all over. He shows pictures of a gleaming woodworking shop that he kept in the basement of the dream home he built in Montford. "People would say, 'you don't do no work; it's too clean.' I'd say 'I clean up every day. If you have a dirty shop, you don't do good work.'"

Those were the days. He remembers putting the roof on his house by the pond. "12 o'clock come and I'd throw that hammer down and I'd go get me a cold beer out of the refrigerator, slide

my boat off and catch me five bream about that long (he indicates the length of his hand) and fry 'em up for lunch, pick a tomato out of the garden, get through it and get back on top...33 squares and I carried every one of them up the ladder. I could do some work back then."

And throughout all this, Gene played his music at nursing homes, churches, festivals and get-togethers all over central Virginia. He remembers the first bluegrass festival he ever attended; it was in Amelia County. "I set my trailer



Photo by Phil Audibert

Gene Hoyle and Gordonsville area fiddler, Alex Caton practice at a nurses station for an upcoming show at the Orange County Nursing Home. "I know a lot of musicians," says Gene, including a bevy of lady fiddlers like Alex in the foreground.

up and got me a cold one and started down the way and there was a guy from Norfolk leaning up against his trailer playing a five-string banjo, and it was about 3 o'clock in the evening. When I went to bed the next morning at 3 o'clock, he was still setting up by that trailer picking that banjo. I said, 'This is for me.' So I went to them ever since." Many's the time Gene Hoyle has played and sung till dawn at bluegrass festivals. He adds a tad wearily, "Them fiddles can play you to death if they take a notion to it." To keep his tenor voice in shape, "I'd eat cough drops all morning and drink coffee."

Gene remembers one time at Dale Shifflett's Exxon in Barbourville, they had closed the store early to pick and sing in the back. "One night this guy walked in, 20 years old, had a zipper pocket in his overalls and he had that full of mouth harps. And he'd blow them harps so hot he'd have to put them in the sink and run water over them. His name was Biery Davis. So I called him up and we've been together ever since."

Gene strums a few chords on his D-76 Martin guitar, an instrument issued in 1976 in honor of the bicentennial and for which he paid \$1,500...a pretty penny in those days. He extends the index finger of his left hand, showing a scar around the tip of the finger. "I laid this on a table saw, cut the whole thing off, and they sewed it back," he says nonchalantly. As a result, certain chords are hard for him to play. He hums a few lines of 'Wildwood Flower.' "I used to play the heck out of that song, just like the Carter family, but