

COMMONS FOLK

Commons fixture Stevie Wayne sings songs of the city

NICK REYNOLDS
NREYNOLDS@ITHACAJOURNAL.COM

There's an old saying that says if you sit in the same place long enough, the world will eventually walk right by you. Stevie Wayne, the bespectacled troubadour of Ithaca's Commons, knows this.

He's been singing the stories of Ithaca's men and women more than 40 years. "I know everybody here. Just about," Wayne said. "Here, you can sit, play, you're fine. If you sit around long enough in New York, they renovate you."

Through sunshine, falling rain — anything but snow — he'll be out, crooning some old standard in a raw, enthusiastic baritone. Wayne doesn't have an angel's voice, but it's not his sound that defines him. Wayne is a song writer, author and historian of Ithaca's crossroads, telling the story of the city through the faces of the people who walk past him every day.

Wayne can regularly be found on the Commons, in front of the Rev office, a spot he chose because it faces the site of an accident at least 15 years ago. He offers few details about what happened except it changed his perspective.

"After my accident, I was in a wheelchair for a long time and when I was able to walk again, I just viewed life different. Because you get a second chance, you know?"



NICK REYNOLDS / STAFF PHOTO
Stevie Wayne, a performer on Ithaca's streets more than 30 years, sings in his regular spot along the Commons, in front of Rev.

After the accident he said he took a job at an Ithaca restaurant but he quit last year after his lung collapsed, a consequence of COPD. Now he plays guitar for money. He has recorded six CDs. He doesn't sell too many.

"I'll never be famous," Wayne said. "I'm just a guy who likes to write songs ... sing those songs. In the morning, first thing when I get up, I'll have a cup of coffee, tune-up, get a blank sheet of paper and get right at it. All I need's a blank page."

On those pages are scribbled the stories of Ithaca from his view — from the bus, from the ground, by the people he sees sitting at Collegetown Bagels. He's enraptured by love stories (Romeo and Juliet's a big one for him), and loves play-

About this feature

The Ithaca Journal is starting a regular feature profile of people who live, work and play on the Commons. To suggest a person for this feature, please email Nick Reynolds at nreynolds@ithacajournal.com.

ing around with the tropes and trips of romance, the same tale told over and over, but never exactly the same.

"A lot of my songs are about men and women, like 'Who's the girl I'm writing about?'" Wayne said. "Everyone wants to know who this girl is, they have to meet this woman. They ask who she is, I say 'It's you, baby.' You know, I'm not a handsome man. But I'm seeing a girl from Paris and a girl from London right now. Who can argue with that? The girl in the song is all girls. All guys."

He takes pride in his music, learning to play guitar as a teen for the price of some stolen beer and pilfered marijuana.

"I'd steal my dad's beer, my brother's weed and say 'Let's skip school! I got the weed!'" Wayne said. "And they let me in. This is where I learned to play guitar. I'd watch their fingers, and once they'd drank enough, they'd show me how to play. After a while, they stopped. They didn't want me to get better than them."

Music pays enough for him to live on. He says he has land in Newfield where a

house he built has sat empty since the accident. For the past few years, what little he's made has gone mostly to his mother, who died a month ago. He attributes his craziness to her and says she ran away from home at 17 to join the circus.

"My mother rode on the back of a Harley in something called a motodrome," Wayne said. "She stood up on the backseat, hung onto the ice holder with a parasol in a ballerina costume. That's why I'm so crazy. People tell me I'm crazy, I tell them, 'You haven't met my mother.'"

Wayne lives in a room on Columbia Street, watching the city's history pass and repeat in real time, from the faces of freshmen to the splintering planks of aging homes.

"I see the kids going to Ithaca College these days," Wayne said. "They look just the same as the ones who went there in the '80s. You'd swear they were their kids or something. Faces never really change, they're still partying on the same porches year after year. I'll see a porch with kids on it, I'll tell them 'That porch has collapsed six times in the last 40 years. I don't advise you kids to dance on that porch.' They'll ask me how I know, but that'd just be giving away my age. I don't even like talking about the Led Zeppelin concert I went to in '74, that's a dead giveaway."

Commons

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railroad stoked the coals. The foundation of Cornell University and Ithaca College (then the conservatory, located in Dewitt Park) solidified that, creating an economy described by historian William E. Robertson in 1977 as "recession proof."

A fire destroyed many of the buildings along the road in 1871, but the development that followed blossomed from the ashes, transforming the tiny lake town of dusty dirt roads and swamplands into a bustling, prosperous community. By the 1920s, the street was packed with attractions pulling the city's population to its heart, gathering for shows at the Strand Theater and shopping at a number of its well-kept department stores, like Rothschild's.

But development carried on without organization or order, and by the 1950s the city was decaying into a mess of unorganized commerce, congested, with signs pointing every direction but one — the city's center. State Street was losing its grip on the city's pulse, its population slipping away to the suburbs and plazas as the county population grew from 66,000 residents in 1950 to 77,000 just 20 years later. Ithaca's population re-

mained stable at around 30,000.

The spurs of the city's initial growth, as influential as they were, were tax-exempt, proving quite a challenge for a city where 60 percent of its land was not producing property tax revenue. Those tax dollars needed to support the city's social services had to be made up from local retailers, whose appeal was eroding.

Though the 1963 founding of the Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency raised promises for change, their actions brought down buildings and the city's hopes.

Then Edward Conley was elected mayor.

Under the slogan "Let's make Ithaca happen again," Conley listened to the pressing of downtown businesses, pulling on a 1950s-era suggestion from a Cornell city planning student, which eventually made its way to the desks of the Greater Ithaca Regional Planning Board in 1968. Plans were drawn up, public and private support was sought, and in 1972 formal planning began for the \$1.13 million project (\$6.45 million today), soon to be universally known as the Ithaca Commons.

Traveling from Kalamazoo, Mich., to Boston to San Diego, the subsequent Citizen Action Committee the city formed studied the interplay of pedestrian malls within similar communities, in the context of the mass development of shopping malls in the 1970s. The tour yielded

encouraging findings. The city backed the mall, and advocates for historic preservation, still reeling from the destruction of so many city landmarks, gave their blessing for something to finally rise from the rubble and promises left unfulfilled from the decade before.

But many citizens were jaded by past urban renewal efforts. Businesses feared for their vitality, expecting the loss of traffic on State Street would be their downfall. The city responded with plans for 900 additional parking spaces for downtown in garages, which, by effect, helped finance the project through bonding. This was made possible by New York State Assemblywoman Constance Cook, who helped create an amendment to the New York State Local Finance Law allowing 20-year bonding of pedestrian malls.

Architects and planners moved quickly once the financial package was set, and in June 1974 ground officially broke on the Ithaca Commons, which was completed in just over a year.

Impact was immediate, with many shoppers returning to the city, growing city sales tax receipts by \$600,000 a year (equal to \$2,661,390 today) between 1971 and 1975.

The 2015 Commons has suffered from a lack of support from the public as the project's costs exceeded original estimates by more than \$6 million and criti-

cism of its multiple delays pushing the project's expected completion date by more than a year.

But as a physical symbol of the city's spirit, one would find it hard to debate that rehabilitation this time around came at a time of dire need and deterioration, of dilapidated appearances and infrastructure, fading public enthusiasm and washed out signage. State Street began as no more than another dirt road, gaining significance as the city grew. Its next evolution saved the city, bringing life back to downtown.

With the last stone set in the renovation of the Commons, it seems like life has returned to downtown once again. The city of Ithaca itself is at a crossroads, the skyline changing by the day, with new generations seeking a walkable heart of town. One could say the Commons has always been a roadmap of the times. But if one is struggling to find where the city is headed, look to State Street. For locals, tourists and planners alike, it's always seemed the perfect place to start.

Nick Reynolds covers the City of Ithaca for The Ithaca Journal. Follow him on Twitter @IJCtyWatch. The History Center in Tompkins County contributed documents to this article.

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DEMOLITION DERBY 8:00PM

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 26TH

CHILDREN'S DAY
HORSEPULLS 6:00PM

THURSDAY AUGUST 27TH

SENIOR CITIZEN'S DAY NOON-8:00PM
GARDEN TRACTOR PULLS 6:00PM

FRIDAY AUGUST 28TH

CHILDREN'S DAY
FIGURE 8 RACE 8:00PM

SATURDAY AUGUST 29TH

*HORSE SHOE PITCHING DOUBLE TOURNAMENT
*DRAFT HORSE SHOW *DOLLAR DAY *FIREMEN'S PARADE
*MONSTER TRUCK SHOW, PICKUP DEMOLITION DERBY & MINIVAN DEMOLITION DERBY HEAT *FIREWORKS

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