



True Faith, True Light: The Devotional Art of Ed Stilley

Kelly Mulhollan

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In 1979, Ed Stilley was leading a simple life as a farmer and singer of religious hymns in Hogscald Hollow, a tiny Ozark community south of Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Life was filled with hard work and making do for Ed, his wife Eliza, and their five children, who lived in many ways as if the second half of the twentieth century had never happened.

But one day Ed's life was permanently altered. While plowing his field, he became convinced he was having a heart attack. Ed stopped his work and lay down on the ground. Staring at the sky, he saw himself as a large tortoise struggling to swim across a river. On his back were five small tortoises—his children—clinging to him for survival. And then, as he lay there in the freshly plowed dirt, Ed received a vision from God, telling him that he would be restored to health if he would agree to do one thing: make musical instruments and give them to children.

And so he did. Beginning with a few simple hand tools, Ed worked tirelessly for twenty-five years to create over two hundred instruments, each a crazy quilt of heavy, rough-sawn wood scraps joined with found objects. A rusty door hinge, a steak bone, a stack of dimes, springs, saw blades, pot lids, metal pipes, glass bottles, aerosol cans—Ed used anything he could to build a working guitar, fiddle, or dulcimer. On each instrument Ed inscribed “True Faith, True Light, Have Faith in God.”

True Faith, True Light: The Devotional Art of Ed Stilley documents Ed Stilley's life and work, giving us a glimpse into a singular life of austere devotion.

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