

Wooden's 99th

Dear Coach Wooden:

My name is Bill Walton and I used to play for you so many years ago that I have lost track of the count.

I wanted to write and wish you the happiest of birthdays as you hit # 99 this year. Go for it all, Coach. You deserve the best and so much more. Bask in the glory and bathe yourself in the kindness and glowing warmth that is always coming your way.

I'm sorry that I have not been a better friend to you over all these years, Coach. You have always treated me with dignity, respect, compassion and concern. You treated me better than I deserved. I only wish that I had had the sense to reciprocate.

I miss you more than ever, Coach. I miss the phone calls from the road where you would share all the wonderful lessons of life, love and traveling about this great land of ours. I particularly remember your tales of growing up back on the farm with Abe Lincoln and the regrets and disappointments that you had when your dad, Joshua, wouldn't let you go with Lewis and Clark when they stopped by looking for one more good man on their way to the promised land down the Ohio River back in the day.

I have also missed the visits in your home office, Coach. Say, did you ever, as I begged, take that framed letter from Richard Nixon down from the wall over the chair where I liked to sit and dream about how wonderful things could be. But it was just so tough to get in the right frame of mind in the shadow of such darkness. Please let me know if it's down now so that I know that it's safe to come over.

It is so neat that your birthday always immediately precedes the start of the basketball season—sort of the natural progression of things, I guess. Cake, song and laughter one day, practice the next. I remember vividly a couple of your recent birthday parties that I was most fortunate to be able to attend. I am well aware that you don't much care for this sort of thing---with all the attention and focus on you-- but the time at VIPS when Jamaal Wilkes had the birthday hat and party favors, and you got up to leave early because you were so embarrassed. We were gratefully able to drag you back to the breakfast table that day when we convinced you that if Jamal had a hat on and was blowing a horn in the restaurant while we all sang Happy Birthday that it had to be all about the love that we have for you.

And then the time that all the guys had the birthday party for you up at Andy Hill's house. We know that you really didn't want to come---that you were busy and tired even though it's just a few short miles from your Mansion on Margate. When you finally did arrive we were all so excited, lucky and privileged. Andy and Kenny Heitz put a photo album together—it is so cool, oh, the memories. I look at it every day, Coach, and it always brings such a smile and glow to my soul.

Those were such terrific days and times, Coach. I miss them as I do you. I haven't been able, like Larry Holyfield with his recent stroke, to get out much lately. But I'm trying with everything that I have. And I think that I'm now going to make it and that better tomorrows are finally and thankfully on the way.

I wanted to send you these two birthday gifts, Coach, even though it's not your nature to accept anything from others. But please, these are really cool. I tried to reach out to your assistant but then I remembered that you don't have one. I wanted to email you but then I recalled that you don't do that. I wanted to call you on your cell phone but then I realized that you don't have one. And I wanted to get these presents to you so that you could play them on your iPod, never thinking that you don't have one of those either.

So I guess this is the only way to get these special offerings to you. The first is the newest Bob Dylan CD, TOGETHER THROUGH LIFE. The second is Neil Young's most recent music, FORK IN THE ROAD.

I know it's not the Mills Brothers, Coach, and I remember how they wouldn't stop playing on your wedding night with Nellie when you had more on your mind that I can even imagine. But these will more than do the job—I promise.

Coach, you gave us everything in your life that you had, including the gift of life itself. You always made it so much fun, it was always such a joyous celebration with you. And we want that celebration to roll on forever.

And now that you are approaching middle age I think that it is about time that you start letting other people do something nice for you. As I have gotten older, Coach, and have been fighting some tough battles of my own recently, a good friend who's been down this road before told me to take each day as it comes---making it your masterpiece—and that it's OK to allow people to help you.

The best way I know to help, Coach, reluctantly accepting that I can't get physically close enough to make a difference, is to give you this gift of music.

In TOGETHER THROUGH LIFE, Coach, our friend, Bob, has some fantastic things to say here, like Beyond Here Lies Nothin', and Life Is Hard. In If You Ever Go to Houston you'll probably be reminded of the game in the Astrodome in 1968. There's lots of other great stuff like Jolene, a love song about you and Nell, Shake Shake Mama, which I'll let you figure out, and the closer, It's All Good—when it's not---REALLY.

But the ones that I really think you'll particularly enjoy are This Dream of You and I Feel A Change Comin' On. Coach, Bob wrote these songs specifically for you so please give them a chance---they get better and better each time through. And like you, the closer you look and listen the more you'll find in there.

And now on to Neil's blast, FORK IN THE ROAD. Oh My !!!!! There is so much great stuff in this one as Neil just takes off and never lifts his foot from the pedal. WOW !!!!! You'll love this.

When Neil tells us that Just Singin' A Song won't change the world I drift and dream back to our days together when you would get so mad at me about EVERYTHING.

Johnny Magic, believe it or not, Coach, is only tangentially related to you, but the melody is incredible and I know that you have special memories of parts of Kansas---although I can't really remember if Wichita is the reason why.

The title song, Fork In The Road, is a classic anthem for the ages, Coach, so put your dancin' shoes on, turn it up and hold on.

But lean in and listen real close to the second to the last cut, Light A Candle---because that is what you did for us, Coach. Neil's incandescent refrain here captures your true essence. You are amazing in so many ways, Coach, because even as you have moved through life you have always remained true to your words---as hard as they were for us to understand much less implement in our own small lives . You have lived the life of a great master, where principle is spelled with an "e" and love is indeed the most important word in our language.

So check it out, Coach---Light A Candle. The verse goes something like, "instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle for where we're going, there's something ahead worth looking for".

We're looking forward to this 99th birthday, Coach, and many, many more.

I do hope that you do receive these gifts of love and life, that you accept them in the spirit that they are given and that this whole package gets by the gatekeeper and thought police.

With eternal gratitude, respect, appreciation and admiration, Coach, please know in your heart that our love for you will never fade away.

Thanks for EVERYTHING, Coach, I love you, and I'm sorry.

Happy 99th Birthday, Coach, thanks for lighting the candle, we're already looking ahead to 100 !!!!!

With endless and unconditional love, Bill Walton, UCLA 1974