

# Ex-Tiger, songwriter Bill Slayback dies at 67



Tony Paul, The Detroit News

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(Photo: Facebook)

Former Tigers pitcher Bill Slayback, who also co-wrote with Ernie Harwell and sang the iconic baseball song "Move Over Babe (Here Comes Henry)," has died at the age of 67.

Slayback was found unconscious in his home Wednesday afternoon in Los Angeles. He had been sick in recent years, having missed a Tigers reunion in Lakeland in 2013 because of health issues.

Slayback pitched three seasons for the Tigers, from 1972-74. His major-league debut was one to remember, when, on June 26, 1972, he took a no-hitter into the eighth inning against the Yankees. John Callison broke it up leading off the eighth with a single to right field, where Al Kaline tried to preserve Slayback's no-hitter by trying to gun down Callison at first base.

Slayback got the win that day and four more in 1972, finishing 5-6 with a 3.20 ERA in 23 games (13 starts) his rookie year, as the Tigers surprisingly won the American League East.

Over a nine-day period in July 1972, Slayback pitched nine innings in three consecutive starts. He later developed arm trouble, only made three appearances for the Tigers in 1973, 16 in 1974 and never got back to the big leagues, spending all of 1975 and 1976 in the minor leagues before he retired.

Fortunately for Slayback, his calling probably wasn't pitching.

"Ernie Harwell said he was the most talented ballplayer he ever met," said Fred Rodgers, a longtime friend of Slayback's, talking over the phone from Houston. "Because he could pitch, play several instruments, sing, write, draw and make furniture."

In 1973, Harwell, an accomplished songwriter in his own right, approached Slayback about writing a song, and the two worked together on "Move Over Babe (Here Comes Henry)," an anthem released as Hank Aaron was chasing down Babe Ruth to become baseball's all-time home run king.

Slayback sang the song, which got substantial airtime on the radio, here and in Japan.

He stayed active in music until his death, working with musicians like Jose Feliciano, and even teaming up with longtime umpire Joe West on projects during a week together three years ago.

Rodgers recalled one special night at a bar, a couple years ago, at the Handlebar J in Scottsdale, Arizona.

"Bill got up on stage with Ed Montague, a retired umpire who played guitar, and Phil Cuzzi was on drums," Rodgers said. "The bar closed at 1, and they entertained us with the doors locked till 4:30 a.m."

He also performed the national anthem at Comerica Park on June 26, 2011, the day Sparky Anderson's No. 11 was retired by the Tigers.

Slayback is a California native who played collegiately at Cal State-Northridge, before the Tigers made him a seventh-round pick in the 1968 draft.

A 6-foot-4 right-hander, he was 6-9 with a 3.84 ERA in 42 major-league games. Over eight minor-league seasons, he was 38-54 with a 3.47 ERA in 145 games. He was a minor-league teammate of former Tigers manager Jim Leyland, and the two stayed in touch.

He walked away after the 1976 season in Evansville, Indiana, and moved home to California. He died at his home in the La Crescenta-Montrose community of Los Angeles. He lived in the same house he grew up in.

He is survived by two daughters, Samantha and Kelli.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

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