



*Entertainer Ben Vereen and Mrs. Jackie Wilson were together in 1978 for the announcement of a medical trust fund for the singer (left). Wilson suffered brain damage after his on-stage collapse five years ago.*

# Big plans to aid stricken singer have fallen short

**By WILLIAM P. BARRETT**  
*Of The Bulletin Staff*

In December 1978, entertainer Ben Vereen announced the creation of a pair of medical trust funds to aid singer Jackie Wilson, totally disabled since his collapse during a 1975 nightclub performance in Cherry Hill, N.J.

The trusts "will do everything possible to bring to Jackie Wilson every available medical facility and opportunity to restore him to maximum health and to raise the much-needed funds," according to a statement released by Vereen at a well-attended

New York City press conference. Vereen would be one of the five trustees.

A co-trustee, Thomas Skinner, said at the time that the trusts would use Vereen's show-business contacts to generate money, probably through benefit performances.

In the intervening 18 months, however, no money has been raised for Wilson, several trustees conceded last week, and there seems to be no specific plans to raise funds in the near future.

Persons connected with Vereen (he did not return telephone calls) blame the lack of fund-raising

efforts on Wilson's tax problems with the Internal Revenue Service. However, those same obstacles did not stop one singing group, The Spinners, from staging a benefit concert for Wilson in 1976 that netted him more than \$57,000.

This is not the first time that announced efforts to raise money for Wilson have run into difficulties. In 1976, a foundation created by rhythm-and-blues singer Bobby Womack on behalf of Wilson raised at least \$20,000, then spent it all as "seed money" in an unsuccessful effort to throw a West Coast benefit. Some of the seed money paid for a \$250-a-week

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# Helping hand for singer has fallen short so far

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executive director and a plush set of offices in Los Angeles.

After Wilson's court-appointed guardian threatened legal action, the foundation sent Wilson a \$10,000 check.

Meanwhile, Wilson, who will turn 46 on June 9, remains at the Medford Leas Retirement Community in Medford, N.J.

According to persons familiar with his situation, although he has no control over his limbs or bodily functions, he is not in a coma and often lies in bed with his eyes open. He is not on a respirator or other life-sustaining device.

"He is in a maintenance situation," said John P. Mulkerin, an Edison lawyer who is Wilson's court-appointed financial guardian and one of Vereen's co-trustees.

Wilson, dubbed "Mr. Excitement" for his writhing style while singing such hits as "Higher and Higher" and "Lonely Teardrops," suffered an apparent heart attack with resulting brain damage on Sept. 29, 1975, while performing at the old Latin Casino.

Mulkerin said consulting doctors have said there is no chance Wilson ever will rise above his current state, even with extensive treatment, and as a result Wilson has not received any significant rehabilitation in several years.

At the time of his collapse, Wilson had virtually no usable assets. Funds to pay for his upkeep, including the \$85-a-day room at Medford Leas and other medical fees, now come from a variety of sources, including worker's compensation, small donations and Social Security. A monthly deficit of about \$1,200 is

covered from the remaining proceeds of the Spinners' concert, which Mulkerin said will be exhausted within a year.

It was the lack of rehabilitative treatment that prompted Vereen and Thomas Skinner, a New York minister who is the chaplain of the Washington Redskins football team, to create a pair of trusts, the "Entertainers Medical Trust" and the "Jackie Wilson Medical Trust." The two made themselves trustees, along with attorney Mulkerin; Bert Padell, Vereen's accountant; and Columbus Sally, a professor at the University of Chicago.

Last week, Mulkerin confirmed that no money had been collected, and he was critical of Vereen.

"I haven't received any cooperation from him," Mulkerin said. "He came out like dynamite, but nothing came of it."

Accountant Padell said fund-raising efforts were delayed pending resolution of IRS claims that Wilson owes more than \$300,000 in past-due taxes dating to the late 1960s. In New Jersey alone, the IRS has filed liens against Wilson totaling more than \$142,000.

"You can't take a chance that the government might have a claim for the money," Padell said, adding he was negotiating with the Newark office of the IRS to settle the claims for a payment of perhaps \$5,000. (An IRS spokesman there declined comment.)

"Once we get these tax problems resolved, we'll have a big benefit," Padell said, although he acknowledged no definite plans had been drawn up. "There are a host of entertainers who want to help him."

Asked how The Spinners were able to throw their concert despite the

liens, Padell said, "I don't know."

Elliott Pollack, a New York City lawyer who drew up the Wilson trust agreements, had a slightly different version. He said fund-raising was waiting on the IRS granting tax-exempt status to the Entertainers Medical Trust, which then would make donations to the trust tax-deductible by the donor. (The Jackie Wilson Trust would not be eligible for tax-free status because by its terms, it would benefit only one person and thus doesn't qualify as a charity.)

Pollack said he applied for tax-exempt status on Jan. 24, 1979, and had no idea why it hadn't been approved. The process normally takes less than two months. He acknowledged, though, he did not "ride herd" on the application.

Skinner and co-trustee Columbus Sally did not return telephone calls made to their offices. Vereen's manager, Bernie Young, said fund-raising was delayed because of "certain legal things that had to be dealt with" which he wouldn't detail.

Young said Vereen, a multi-faceted performer who has won an Emmy and a Tony, never has met Wilson but was very familiar with his music. He said Vereen became involved out of a general sense of concern.

"Ben's a humanitarian," Young said.