

## ⇒ HOUSE CALL | WILLIAM H. MACY | Six Strings Led to a Movie Career ⇐

For William H. Macy, the 'Shameless' television star, music and a roaring audience made for a love of performance. Mr. Macy states:

My older brother, Fred, saved me. When I was 12, he came home on a break from college with a guitar.

Fred was muscular and tan and seven years older than me. I wanted to be him so much. He showed me three chords and later taught me to sing the calypso song "Shame & Scandal."

The guitar lessons and song later helped me reverse a downward spiral and gave me purpose.

I first grew up in Macon, Ga., and then Decatur. When I was 9, we moved to Cumberland, Md.

Our first home in Cumberland was owned by my grandmother. It was a vaguely Victorian, grand old house. We had the upstairs and another family lived downstairs.

When I was 11, my dad, William Sr., built us a house by hand in La-Vale, a suburb. It was redwood and looked like a barn, with an open floor plan and two bedrooms. I loved that house. It was on Haystack Mountain with nothing around us except woods. I lived a Tom Sawyer existence.

During World War II, my father flew a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber called Paper Doll. After the war, he ran a construction company in Atlanta for a while.

We moved north so he could join his father's company, the Macy Insurance Agency. He eventually took it over with my uncle.

When I was 13, Dad bought me a tenor guitar.

School was hard on me. No one noticed I needed help catching up. Many years later, I realized I had undiagnosed learning disabilities. I was frightened and shy in class. Fortunately, when I was a sophomore in high school, there was a talent show. I played guitar and sang "Shame & Scandal," including the line, "That girl is your sister, but your mama don't know!"

The audience roared with laughter. That seared me. I've been chasing after that sound my entire life.

Dad and I were very tight. We were closer than I was with my mom. He always had time for me.

Mom was tough. Her first husband had been killed in Italy during the war. She had a young son, my brother, and she'd hardly known her husband. My father adopted my brother immediately.

But my mom was severely traumatized by her first husband's death and drank a good bit. That was a wedge between us.

My father saw me for who I was. Humor was our thing. He wrote down jokes and put them in his wallet so he wouldn't forget them. He was a performer at heart.

He also passed along a love of carpentry. Dad would fix everything. He restored a 1929 Ford Model A—after he built the garage.

When I was 15, I formed a Peter, Paul and Mary-like folk group called the Minisangers with two friends—Lindsay and Michael.



We played gigs all over town. The folk movement was well under way and we covered hit songs.

I had a major role in my senior high school play, "Camelot." I sang a solo song. I loved the social aspect of theater and the attention. But more important, I didn't fail. I came to life.

I attended Bethany College in West Virginia for three semesters. I spent most of my time in the theater department. But my grades weren't great and I dropped out. I moved to Washington, D.C., for about a year and just hung out.

My father soon complained. If he was going to pay for college, he said, I needed to get going.

That's when I found Goddard College in Vermont. There, I studied theater with David Mamet. He was the smartest guy I'd ever met. He made me realize that acting was going to be my life. After one of our performances of Dave's "Lone Canoe," he came backstage and said I was on fire. I had ambition from that point on.

Today, I live with my wife, actress Felicity Huffman, and our two daughters in the Hollywood Hills. We built a Craftsman there 18 years ago. We also bought the two lots next door and a third lot, and landscaped all of it. The quiet and privacy are important for us. I also love my wood shop above the garage.

I still have my father's Ford Model A at our country home in Colorado. It looks brand-new. When we're out there, I take it for a drive and think about my dad.

—As told to Marc Myers. William H. Macy, 70, is an Emmy-winning actor who starred in the film " Fargo " and directed " The Layover . " He currently is in the Showtime series " Shameless . "

