

Mark Bittner, who starred in hit S.F. documentary ‘The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill,’ dies at 74

By **Sam Whiting**, Staff Writer
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Mark Bittner feeds a flock of wild cherry-headed conures in 2005 from his front porch on the Greenwich Steps in San Francisco.
Sam Deaner/For the S.F. Chronicle



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Without Mark Bittner, the wild parrots of Telegraph Hill would just be a flock of rambunctious birds laughing in the hills of San Francisco. Instead, they became the subject of a celebrated film that elevated the vivid green cherry-headed conures into celebrities and helped get them named the official animal of San Francisco.

The Board of Supervisors unanimously [elevated the parrots to that status in 2023](#) after they narrowly beat out sea lions in the final round of a [Chronicle contest](#) that drew more than 27,000 votes. The pinnipeds had the Pier 39 marketing team on their side — but they could not best Bittner, the ponytailed, Beatnik-styled bird lover who co-starred in the 2003 documentary “The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill” and wrote a 2004 memoir of the same title.

“Mark celebrated the parrots’ wildness but also became their public voice and interpreter and ultimately safeguarded the flock,” said former San Francisco Supervisor Aaron Peskin, who lives on Telegraph Hill and co-sponsored the [official-animal legislation](#). “Mark explained this curious flyby phenomenon to San Francisco and the world.”

The film by Judy Irving became a city classic due in part to its surprise ending in which she, the detached documentarian, fell for her subject, Bittner, an unemployed romantic who lived essentially as a squatter in a small room beneath a house on the Greenwich Steps. When "The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill" had a [sold-out 20th anniversary screening at the Roxie Theater](#), in January 2024, Bittner and Irving, who had married, appeared onstage afterward for an audience Q&A.



Mark Bittner with two parrots from the Telegraph Hill flock, Big Bird, left, and Filbert, in 2005.

That event was his last appearance on behalf of the parrots and the film. In early 2026, he left Irving, the parrots and Telegraph Hill behind to pursue the life of a nomad in a camper van.

He made it as far as Humboldt County for a 10-day housesitting gig in Arcata. He died there on March 1, two months into his indefinite road trip. The cause of death was a heart attack, said his sister, Beth Lyons of Edgewood, Wash. He was 74 and had been treated for heart disease, which runs in the family, she said.

"Mark was a very unique person," said his sister, who is two years his junior. "He wasn't a run-of-the-mill person, and never was."

That is made clear in the opening sequence of the film. A flock of parrots are eating cherry blossoms in a park near the Embarcadero when they suddenly take off en masse and travel in formation up the east slope of Telegraph Hill. There, Bittner is waiting to greet them with a kiss on the beak, knowing each of the look-alike birds by the name he has given it.

"Where's Fanny?" he asks the birds. "C'mon Fanny. Oh, there you are."

Bittner clearly had a way with the birds — but he also had sunflower seeds to tempt them. Soon there were birds perched up and down his bare arms and hands, with one favorite resting on his forehead and pecking at his eyeglasses.

“I don’t think of myself as an eccentric,” he tells the camera with a laugh that suggests even he isn’t entirely convinced. “These wild parrots were a big mystery to me, and I wanted to find out who they were.”

That mystery drives the film, along with the mystery of Bittner himself, who lives off the kindness of strangers he has met along the way. That’s how he first came to Telegraph Hill, as a valet for an elderly woman who needed help carrying her groceries and supplies up 100 steps. Bittner became her caretaker and ended up outlasting her.

“I haven’t really paid rent in 25 years,” he tells the filmmaker, Irving, who then bores in with the tough follow-up question: “Tell me again why you refuse to get a job?”



Mark Bittner in 2004 with the wild parrots of Telegraph Hill.
Lacy Atkins/SFC

Mark Christopher Bittner was born Nov. 29, 1951, in Vancouver, Wash., where he grew up. His dad, Clyde Bittner, was a door and window salesman. His mom, Genevieve, worked at Seattle First National Bank. Mark taught himself guitar and became proficient enough to perform Beatles and Bob Dylan covers at school assemblies and talent shows while at Columbia River High School.

He also considered trying out for the wrestling team, having practiced holds on his younger sister. “He put me in a full nelson,” she said, “but I don’t think he could have ever gotten serious about something like that.”

He was more serious about the music. After graduating from Columbia River in 1969, he drifted around Europe before becoming a busker on the streets of Seattle, where the family moved after his dad got a job in cable television.

In 1973, his solo act became a duo after his sister graduated from high school. They piled into her 1964 push-button transmission Dodge Dart and drove down the coast, crossing the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco. They moved into one of the old residential hotels in North Beach and became a brother-sister act, busking for change on street corners.

But it failed to catch on, and Beth left to pursue a solo act. After trying unsuccessfully to do the same, Mark pursued the life of a bohemian. He was on the street for 15 years until he found his way to the caretaker's job in the old warren of rooms in houses along the Greenwich Steps. His place was right in the center, with 100 steps up to Montgomery Street to the west and 100 steps down to Sansome to the east. It had a hot plate and a dorm fridge on top of a milk crate.

He started feeding the birds because it was a good way to make friends. They were ever-loyal, as long as he kept them in sunflower seeds. When the stock ran low, he would place a sign at Speedy's Market at the top of Union Street, asking for donations. That always brought in \$10 or \$20.

Irving, who has made four feature documentaries focusing on birds, started filming Bittner in 1998 after two friends separately urged her to check out the story. She hauled her camera, plus a few rolls of 16mm film in heavy metal canisters, down from Montgomery Street.

"At the time, those birds were his only friends, and it was deep," she recalled. "He was living as a hermit in that cottage, and we just became closer and closer, and it developed into a relationship, as happens sometimes."



Mark Bittner and his wife, Judy Irving, in 2012.
Dania Maxwell/Special to The Chronicle

The project took 4½ years, with Bittner feeding the birds at least once a day, and often more frequently, on demand. “There was another thing I noticed about Mark right away. He has a lot of time,” Irving said in the film’s narration. “No money but all the time in the world. How does he get away with that?”

New owners eventually moved into the main house and decided to renovate Bittner’s cottage, which meant he had to leave. Bittner didn’t object. It was the end of the 20th century and he took it as a sign, said Irving, and moved in with friends in the East Bay. He cried when leaving the birds but was brave enough to have his ponytail ceremonially cut off, signaling a fresh start.

A year later he was back, again rent-free, as caretaker for a cat in a cottage in the Heslet Garden Compound, next to his original place.

He started feeding the birds again but then stopped, not wanting to get sucked into what he now saw as co-dependency, Irving said. In 2001, she moved in after selling her place in Noe Valley. A few months later, the compound was put up for sale. Irving put together five buyers for the seven units, including the one she and Bittner lived in.

“Mark and I were together for 25 years,” she said. “The more we talked, the more I came to respect him for his independence, his insights, his wisdom, his spiritual take on things, and for his understanding of those particular birds and his friendship with them.”

They worked together to log and edit 36 hours of 16mm film into an 83-minute movie. There were 45 birds in the flock, and Bittner could recognize each by name, which was crucial in labeling shots to maintain continuity of the storyline.

The film was released theatrically in 2005 and played in 500 theaters. It then aired on public television, where it was the highest rated program of 2007. It grossed \$3 million, but Irving said theaters and distributors took most of it. Bittner’s related 2004 memoir, “The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill: A Love Story ... With Wings,” made it onto the New York Times bestseller list and remains in print, in its 16th edition.

Among champions of the book was the celebrated poet Gary Snyder. He compared Bittner to Thoreau, after he climbed the Greenwich Steps “seeking the sky and a moment of breath, and ran into Mark Bittner, for whom, in turn, a flock of wild parrots appeared,” Snyder wrote in a blurb for the book. “It was a liberating moment, right on the Hill where I had lived and worked some 40 years earlier ... and I’m honored to be one of the parrots in the trees.”

Bittner was a nursemaid to the individual characters in his book, wrapping them in towels to lovingly take them to the vet when he detected that they weren’t feeling well. He also worked for the birds collectively by helping spur an ordinance passed in 2007 to prohibit people from feeding the 40 or so wild parrots residing in city parks — a problem he had partly created by feeding the birds in the movie. He spoke and wrote about the dangers of rat poison to the wild parrot population, which has

now grown to about 220 birds in one large flock, headquartered in and around the Transamerica Redwood Park in the Financial District.

Parks advocate Ken Maley, a Telegraph Hill resident for 40 years, was at first skeptical of the feeding and caring for these wild birds out of concern that they would become unafraid of humans. But over time, he’s witnessed that “the flocks of parrots are much greater in numbers than they were when he started, and very healthy it seems,” Maley said. “They’ve obviously managed to survive and grow in population without Mark feeding them. I enjoy the parrots every day.”

The film ends with Bittner and Irving becoming a couple — but that was not the end of the story.

They were married in 2006 by Peskin, in a surprise ceremony at the end of Irving’s 60th birthday party at the South End Rowing Club. At the crucial moment in their vows there was a flyover of wild parrots, which looked down and seemed to be laughing at them.



Mark Bittner and a parrot friend at his Telegraph Hill home in 2024.
Courtesy of Judy Irving

“Just like it was planned, right after the nuptials the parrots flew over the building,” said Lyons. “It was the coolest thing.”

The newlyweds continued to live in the cottage. Back-end pay from the film and book residuals supported Bittner while he wrote a second memoir, “Street Song,” about his life as a guitar busker before he met the wild parrots. The manuscript, more than 300 pages, was completed in 2024, and he left it on his laptop in Irving’s care when he went on the road. She is now looking for a publisher.

The couple had divorced amicably in 2024, in order to “set each other free,” Irving said. “He had two months out on the road as a nomad. It wasn’t enough, but he got out there and did it.”

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Sam Whiting
REPORTER



Sam Whiting has been a staff writer at The San Francisco Chronicle since 1988. He started as a feature writer in the People section, which was anchored by Herb Caen’s column, and has written about people ever since. He is a general assignment reporter with a focus on writing feature-length obituaries. He lives in San Francisco and walks three miles a day on the steep city streets.
