'His music grew out of a much older garden'

*This is an edited transcript of an interview that Clay Eals conducted with Bruce "U. Utah" Phillips on March 2, 2000, in Phillips' hometown of Nevada City, California, for **Steve Goodman: Facing the Music**. Phillips' comments are part of the book, but given his death on May 23, 2008, it seems appropriate to honor him by sharing an extended expression of his wit and insight.*

How did you first come into contact with Steve?

I had to leave [the state of] Utah on the run. I was blacklisted. I found this whole community all over the country, this whole family of folk music that goes from San Francisco to Boston and everybody knows everybody. I was green as corn, and Steve was already in it.

The first year I got to play Chicago was at Richard Harding's Quiet Knight in 1971. I was sleeping in the IWW union hall over on Lincoln, Freedom Hall, within walking distance of the Quiet Knight. People who were hanging out there would go down to the Earl's [the Earl of Old Town club, operated by Earl Pionke]. He had an after-hours license. We could hang out there, swap shit and sing and talk. Became acquainted with Earl's Pearls: Steve, John Prine, Ed and Fred Holstein, Bonnie Koloc, and then part-time Tom Dundee and me. The Earl was immensely loyal to you, and, consequently, you were immensely loyal to Earl.

I played Richard Harding's. Between shows, I went over to the Earl's to say hi. Earl wouldn't say hi, wouldn't look at me, sat at the bar with his back to me. I tapped him on the shoulder, and he said, "I'm not mad, just hurt." Only the Earl could do that.

I also emceed the Philadelphia Folk Festival. Earl had flown himself and Steve Goodman in. Steve wasn't booked at the festival. He was just getting out of Chicago, not recording yet. The Earl got the backstage security to flag me, and I went over and talked to Earl. "I got Steve here. Could you get him on the mainstage between acts?" "Yeah." I got him on the mainstage. That's the first time I heard "City of New Orleans." It was the first time a lot of people heard "City of New Orleans." But Earl would do that. He was forceful.

It was Steve and the Holsteins and the Earl who started Somebody Else's Troubles. I guess it was Steve's money when he finally was making some money. Even then, Earl would tell everybody that that was a co-op. Bullshit. He ran that with an iron fist. "Somebody Else's Money," we used to call it. "Somebody Else's Rubble." The Earl was very generous with Earl's Pearls, with his people.

How would you describe Steve?

The first thing I noticed about Steve was, of course, that he had a great smile and a really infectious sense of humor. The second thing was that he was writing wonderful songs. The third thing was a really unique relationship with John Prine, which bore fruit in songs, because they had an authentic sense of play. They didn't play music. They played like kids. Just listening to their conversation, it was like flashbulbs going off, ideas bouncing back and forth that would turn into spontaneous songs that would turn into collaborations. They were outrageously funny. They were a couple of really good old friends playing together in this sandbox for adults, the Earl.

I'd be in and out of town, and Steve was working in Chicago. Every three months, I'd come back and play. I'd be in town for a Wednesday through Sunday at the Earl. Nobody does extended runs anymore. Now it's one-night stands, or two nights at the most, like Passim's in Boston. There was enough audience to justify a show Wednesday night, a show Thursday night, two shows Friday night, two or three shows Saturday night and a matinee on Sunday.

Once, Richard Harding asked me to come in during the day, and the waitresses were talking about unionizing. The branch of the IWW did a benefit for the veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade at the Quiet Knight, and Earl came, he was at the bottom of the stairs, and he looked up and screamed at me, "You son of a bitch, trying to organize my waitresses!"

I can raise waitresses' tips 10 to 20 percent, because I was the only person around at that time who was singing labor songs, so I'd always end the first show with one of those labor songs and remind the audience that the cocktail waitresses have the worst job imaginable, dealing with a bunch of drunks. So they would, out of guilt, they would increase the tips. Also, they would go to the tables where the people were boisterous, and they'd quiet them down for me, so it was a partnership that worked well.

What gave Steve his edge onstage?

I think that Steve went to the crossroads — you know what I mean, like Robert Johnson. The rumor was that Steve had gone to the crossroads and made a pact with the devil. In exchange for his soul, he could play the guitar that well. So I thought, every time I came back to Chicago, Steve was turning into a monster guitar player. It came from a lot of hard work, but from my perception it was seemingly coming from nowhere. He was fantastic, really working hard. A megaton better. You wonder if he went to the crossroads.

He used to come into my shows at Earl's sometimes. I never had the sense whether he liked what I was doing or not. I was just glad to see him around. I think he understood what I was doing was really a one-man show, Act One and Act Two. I was doing a tight show but pretending I was making it up as I went along. But he could look at it and see, "He knows what he's doing."

I remember him sitting in the audience once at the bar at Troubles. It was an unkind thing to say, but it popped into my head. I said, "There's Steve Goodman. You love to hire him in bars because it makes the drinks look bigger." I don't know if he appreciated it, but I thought it was funny.

It was a little while till I knew that he had leukemia. I used to stay with Fred Holstein after I stopped staying at Freedom Hall. He had a room I could bunk in right next to the El. That's when I learned how to sleep with the world clack-a-clacking around you. I think that Fred told me [about the leukemia], and it was sort of the feeling around town that we were folksingers. Steve really understood what that meant. That meant you sing other songs besides your own. He had a real sense of roots, and his music grew out of a much older garden.

We were part of this whole music revival, where there was a real strong concept of selling out. Everybody wanted out, but at the same time there was an onus attached to it. We wanted to reach the industrial level. Steve did, and really wanted it, and nobody grudged it at all because of the leukemia. We said, "Yeah, let him get everything that he possibly can get."

He was viewed differently because of his illness.

I believe so, in terms of his ambition, and every break should go his way, and everybody was not jealous but congratulatory. And he was absolutely talented.

This is one of the breaks in the folk-music revival, in terms of commercial viability and revival, that you had somebody as good as Fred Holstein or as good as Art Thieme, who knew every song in the world. Fred could play an audience like a harp. He was brilliant. He couldn't go Steve's route. He couldn't go John's route because he couldn't write songs. That's when you move from folk revival to the full range of folk music, from the traditional. Everybody was exposed to their elders at folk festivals and at concerts, to everybody from Son House to Mississippi John Hurt, all of them, and could learn from it and were writing songs that used those tune and verse models so that they could be sung by anybody, and they would continue to be sung by other people, long after you were gone.

"City of New Orleans" was entering the vision — that commercial break, when the commercial side was looking for singer/songwriters, when it was cheaper to put one guy with a bunch of songs, that you had to sell a publishing agreement to, that you schlep around the country instead of a band. They weren't interested anymore in people who sang folk music. They were interested in singer/songwriters, whose songs may or may not become folk songs.

That was the crest of the folk revival as folk music. And, of course, now you have singer/songwriters who sing only their own songs that haven't been able to access their elders, so they're using jazz or rock models. Very few people can sing Dar Williams or John Gorka songs. I can't fault them. They're brilliant writers and fine performers, but their songs are not being delivered up with the possibility of entering tradition, as were, say, Tom Paxton and Len Chandler and Phil Ochs.

Steve broke out. We're talking about at the trade level, where you own what you do, you own your guitar, you own your songs, and you work from club to club, from society to society, around the country making a living, not a killing, and you're working at a trade level, which means that the people hiring you generally really want to have folk music in their town, and so you become a partner in that effort.

Then there's the industrial level, where you become a commodity, you're doing this exactly for the market forces. A lot of the song work is done by people in the home office. It's my understanding that to be recorded, Steve had to give up a certain percentage of the publishing, and he did that repeatedly, to the extent that when he passed away, he owned very little of what he created.

I admired his skill with the guitar, the way he wrote, the way he handled himself and talked to people. He was everybody's friend. He was never mean-spirited. He never had an angry word for anybody — this idea of the tradition, of what Steve did, of acknowledging what grew up from a much older garden. There's an enormous pool of folk music that stretches back and back for an eon or two, and that he becomes the inheritor of and takes out things that he can use and he makes new. That includes respect for the elders, respect for the people who come up in their garden — what he did for Martin, Bogan and Armstrong, and what he did for Jethro Burns.

Jethro Burns was a great musician. He could have gotten an audience in jazz clubs or what-have-you. Steve gave him a whole new audience of young people by taking him around the country, by taking him to festivals. And he did the same thing with Martin, Bogan and Armstrong.

That's the uniqueness of Steve. He was aware of where what he did came from, and he honored that. He not only honored that tradition, but he honored the people who were still alive and contributed to it. That was the way he honored it, by creating work and audiences for these people. That was the most extraordinary thing about Steve. That was what taught me. I was instructed by Steve. My way of going at it was, since I was the inheritor, to have my tours driven by young musicians whose music I liked and wanted people to hear. I said, "OK, you drive, you know the record, calling ahead, road-manage, and while we're driving, we'll talk about the train, and you can sing a couple of songs in every show." It's an apprenticeship system, see. Same thing. I got that idea from watching what Steve was doing with these elders, that you take and you give back, you take and you put back.

You were 14 years older than Steve, yet you say you learned from him.

Well, sure. You learn from everybody. I learn from everybody. The most powerful intellect I know is Ani DiFranco, and I learn from her all the time.

Tell me more about "City of New Orleans."

That song is start-to-finish descriptive of one trip on a passenger train, the pre-Amtrak passenger line, and he paints that picture of it as an experience that he's having, that he's in, and that he realizes while he's in it that very few other people are going to be able to enjoy that experience. That's something in the past.

He liked my train songs. He used to listen to train songs and ask questions about it. I was also riding the trains as much as I could. "Daddy, What's a Train" was written at midnight in the train station in Buffalo, nobody around, huge, empty, black, cold place, nobody there. And Steve really got there.

Also, he took some risks in there: "old black men." He took some risks in there that were correct. That was a risky thing to do, but that's what he saw, and that's what he felt, and that's what he said. There was no question but that was what he was going to say and do.

Talking about mulching the tradition, putting back after you've taken out. How many people did I talk to, young people, who said that Arlo Guthrie or Willie Nelson wrote "City of New Orleans"? Gradually, the song separates itself from Steve's name. That's how songs become tradition, is if they persist, but they lose their name. It's a great song, I love to sing it, I know where it came from, but it's like†"Barbara Allen."

That's, to me, the best tombstone you're ever going to have, is giving people something they embrace and take into their corporate body, into the body of themselves, and put the work in their lives, long after you're gone. Even if your name is missing from it, it's the best monument to what you've done in the world that you could possibly have. I think Steve achieved that.

How did Steve's Cubs songs resonate with you?

I always loved baseball. I went to games with Fred Holstein. Fred Holstein when I was there caught his first foul in his life [Sept. 12, 1984, eight days before Steve Goodman died]. Fred was so proud. The ball came down, it was coming right at me, and I dodged, and it bounced off my shoulder, and I looked down, and Fred was sitting there, and it was in his hand. It fell into his hand. I tried to get it out of him, but he said, "My father brought me to baseball games all my life, and I never caught a goddamn fly."

There I was in Cubland. One of the guys who used to come into the clubs all the time was Mark Jacobs. Mark's dad and wife Lois ran a political-button store. He started the latter-day Cubs fan club. He was in Troubles and Holsteins all the time and at the Earl. They were talking about the Cubs all the time.

Finally, I started going to the games with Fred and listening to Harry Caray, and finally I got introduced to a Puerto Rican woman, old woman whose apartment there in that district right by the park, that hosted all the Puerto Rican players, no matter what side they were on, anytime they were in town, and then I wound up watching games from the roof of her building. I got into it. I used to book around Cubs home games.

You understood why Steve could become so attached.

But also, all of Steve's music, even "City of New Orleans," is tinged with irony. I relate that irony to the irony of his own mortality. Irony pervades the whole thing, and if there is an anachronism and an irony on the planet, it's the Cubs. Every triumphant and tragic element you could combine into one thing is stirred up into the Cubs, their whole history. It's not just baseball. It's not just baseball at all.

The last time I saw him was in Chicago. His death hit me hard. I heard that he was ill. I had moved to Spokane, Washington. Then I heard he was in Seattle for treatment.

Steve was not a household word. Why not?

He would have been. Hell, if he were alive today, he'd be legendary. He had the aggression, he had the charm, he had the talent. He had everything that you need, and slow and steady wins the race. He would have made it, he would have got there. It's like Kate Wolf, who died from leukemia. She would have gotten where she wanted to be, and Steve would have gotten where he wanted to be. They would be two different places, but both would have gotten where they wanted to be, except their lives were rudely interrupted. That's the sad and wasteful thing about it.

Steve wanted to penetrate that industrial level, and I despise that industrial level, just despise it. At the same time, it didn't bother me if that's where he wanted to go. He was just a fine and generous soul, never had a mean word to say.