

# A short life, well-lived

## Author to share biography of songwriter Steve Goodman

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**By Alan Solan**

Steve Goodman is the author of that song about a train everyone thinks Arlo Guthrie wrote.

But Brian Gill isn't confused. After all, he heard Goodman play "The City of New Orleans" in the back room of a Chicago club just a couple of weeks after Goodman wrote it.

Diagnosed with leukemia at age 20, Goodman forged ahead with his musical career for the next 16 years, laughing and making others laugh, concealing his disease from all but his family and close friends.

Goodman, who died in 1984 at age 36, wrote dozens of songs in his career, but none approached the stature of "The City of New Orleans." It became a Top-20 hit for Guthrie in 1972 and later was recorded by dozens of others, including Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and John Denver.

Some of Goodman's lesser-known, but still well-loved songs include "Video Tape," "Chicken Cordon Bleus," "Banana Republics," "Lincoln Park Pirates," and "A Dying Cubs Fan's Last Request."

Guthrie altered the chord structure slightly on "City of New Orleans," creating a catchy "hook," and undeniably making the song easier to sing along with and understand. But 35 years later, sitting behind the counter in Guitars' Friend in Moscow, where he works, Gill still plays the song the way he has always played it, the way he learned it from "Chicago Shorty" himself.

Gill is full of stories about Goodman, and he never tires of telling them, or of playing Goodman's music on his guitar and on his KRFP radio show. We'll all get the chance to hear the stories and the songs July 6, when Gill joins Seattle author Clay Eals at BookPeople for a book-signing for "Steve Goodman: Facing the Music," a biography published this year by ECW Press.

Eals, 55, spent nine years, interviewed more than 1,000 people (including Gill), and reviewed hundreds of hours of audio tape and film to create the 778-page book, which he says he'd gladly accept as his magnum opus.

"I felt this book was something I had to do," Eals said during a telephone interview from Seattle. "I figured there might not be another book on Goodman, and I wanted to do it right."

Eals' first book, "Every Time a Bell Rings: The Wonderful Life of Karolyn Grimes," is a biography of the actress who played Zuzu Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life."

Eals first saw Goodman perform in 1977, and then again in 1981, both times in Eugene, Ore. He had listened to Goodman's records throughout the '70s, but said seeing him in concert was a different experience altogether.

"What really did it was seeing him perform," he said. "He was magnetizing. He just got me."

After Goodman died at a Seattle hospital in 1984, Eals wrote an obituary/tribute for a local newspaper, and the idea of writing a Goodman biography was planted far in the back of his mind.

The idea grew and eventually became "Steve Goodman: Facing the Music." If no one else writes a book about Goodman, it likely would be because Eals has covered the subject so well.

"It's a story of Steve Goodman, but it's also a story of an era," Eals said. "The Chicago folk scene is woefully unsung."

Gill, who surely is one of Goodman's biggest fans and promoters, says he never met a more intense guy than Goodman. He knew his time was short and intended to make the most of it.

"He was so full of life with this death thing hanging over his head," Gill said.

"The thread of this book is mortality," Eals said. "How do we live in the face of death?"

Goodman never became a household name like his friend, John Prine, but by all accounts, he thoroughly enjoyed his brief life, and remained amazed to the end that he could make his living just by singing songs and making people happy.

"I love music. I was captivated by Goodman," Eals said. "I felt it was a book I had to write."

Besides, he adds, "Why write the 50th book on Elvis?"

- Brian Gill will perform at One World Cafe following the book signing.

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