

Singer Goodman had much more than fame

Steve Goodman

Facing the Music
A Biography

By Clay Eals, with 18-track tribute CD by other artists
ECW Press, 778 pages, \$33

Reviewed by Al Simmons



WHY publish a biography of an obscure folksinger who died more than 20 years ago, let alone one that is almost 800 pages long? American author Clay Eals explains that question away in one sentence: "Fame is a misleading measure of greatness."

Chicago native Steve Goodman, best known for writing the Arlo Guthrie hit *City of New Orleans*, epitomized that sentiment.

Goodman died in 1984 at age 36, having recorded 10 albums filled with such classics as *Penny Evans*, *The Dutchman* and *You Never Even Call Me by My Name*.

He made friends and fans throughout North America, including Winnipeg, where he headlined the Winnipeg Folk Festival four times, the last in 1983.

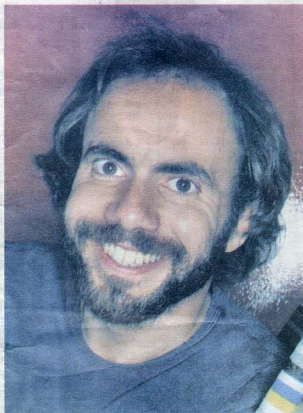
This loving biography, released by a Toronto-based publisher, is about the size of the Chicago phone book, and it lists off almost as many names.

Eals, a Seattle journalist, has crammed every minute detail of Goodman's life into a tome that could have been titled "A Short Life" because we are continually reminded about Steve's height — five-foot-two.

At 20, he was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. After a week of anger he accepted the fact but people kept feeding his despondency saying: "You poor genius, we love you because you're dying." He learned that it was simpler to keep his illness secret from his audiences.

Even as a young boy, he was known for his amazing voice and stage presence, but he was told **not to bother trying** to play the guitar because his fingers were too short and chubby, a comment that spurred him on to practise and become one of the best improvisers in the business.

His charisma and talent shone at an early age. One of fellow high school students, Hillary Rodham (not yet Clinton), said: "Steve was somebody you always wanted on your side because he would lead, like a pied piper."



Goodman was unlucky at baseball, but lucky at love.

Goodman and his band played at her rival's campaign rally, and she subsequently lost in her bid to become school president.

For Steve nothing was more compelling than baseball. Throughout his career he longed to be asked to sing the national anthem at Wrigley Field for his beloved Chicago Cubs. His wish never materialized, but fortunately for Steve he was lucky at love.

He was about to leave the stage at one of Chicago's premier folk clubs, The Earl of Old Town, at the same time the five-foot-nine-and-half waitress, Nancy Pruter, was bustling

between tables. He "turned, stepped off the stage and walked into her abundance."

They adopted a baby girl, Jessie. After Steve's doctors mistakenly told him that his chemotherapy had rendered him sterile, Nancy became pregnant with Sarah and a few years later with Rosanna.

Steve quickly became a regular at The Earl. He was the warm-up act for Gordon Lightfoot and other folk luminaries, but it was Kris Kristofferson and Paul Anka who gave him his first break.

They wanted to whisk him off to New York to record but Steve insisted that his friend John Prine be included. Prine's songs and albums ended up eclipsing Steve's. Throughout his life he supported, Prine even producing one of John's most successful albums *Bruised Orange*.

Steve's first albums did not achieve much success because his riveting stage persona did not translate to vinyl. Then Guthrie recorded *City of New Orleans* in 1972.

*Good morning America how are you
Don't you know me I'm your native son?*

The answer to that musical question is "no." Not many Americans knew him. Steve Goodman was certainly not a household name, but everyone who saw him perform live agreed that he was little fireball of energy.

Just as his success grew, a new and more devastating type of leukemia had taken root — myelodysplasia. This time he could not keep it a secret. "I don't see myself as another Terry Fox," he told the *Winnipeg Sun*.

"There are a lot of brave people out there who don't get their names in the paper. I'm no different."

At times the names and places and minute details in this book roll by like so much repetitive scenery on a long train ride.

But every now and then a major event takes place or a celebrity name is dropped and the journey becomes so interesting that you want to slow down and savour every scene.

Almost all of the big-name folksingers Eals quotes have played the **Winnipeg Folk Festival**, and his book should be essential reading for anyone who attends the festival.

It will serve as a reminder that, not too many years ago, a mainstage audience could sit spellbound listening to a man playing a guitar and singing a song, and it would be so quiet that you could hear a pin drop on the Prairie.

*Al Simmons is a Manitoba entertainer and a frequent
Winnipeg Folk Festival mainstage MC.*