

# Steve Goodman bio pays homage to ‘City of New Orleans’ writer

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By **JOHN ROGERS**

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Clay Eals wanted to write a biography on star-crossed folk singer Steve Goodman that people wouldn't be able to put down.

Instead, he produced a book that, at 778 pages, is so huge that it's hard to pick up.

"I think Goodman would have liked that," Eals says, laughing at a comment one early reader of the book made to him. After all, he points out, the subject of "Steve Goodman: Facing the Music" barely stood 5 feet tall and might have struggled to juggle a telephone book.

"Facing the Music" holds a lot of words for a guy who lived only 36 years and had but one hit song, albeit a modern American classic, "City of New Orleans."

But then the diminutive Goodman, who captivated audiences by doing everything from slapping out the instrumental "Dueling Banjos" on his face in uncanny detail to donning a cowboy hat nearly as big as he was to sing the ultimate country music parody, "You Never Even Call Me by My Name," packed a lot of living into those years.

"Many people say he lived more life in his 36 years than most of us will in twice that if we get there," says Eals, who interviewed 1,050 people for the book.

His source list reads like a who's who of country, folk and pop music, with a dash of politics thrown in. Among those who filled him in on Goodman were Jimmy Buffett, Emmylou Harris, Jackson Browne, John Prine, John Hartford, Bonnie Raitt, Willie Nelson, Arlo Guthrie and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

It was Guthrie, Goodman once said, who saved his career by turning "City of New Orleans" into the elegy to America's vanishing passenger trains that it became after more upbeat versions of the song by Goodman and John Denver flopped.

Clinton, the New York senator and presidential candidate, performed in a high school musical with Goodman.

"He used his talents to make people really happy, make them laugh," Eals' quotes her as saying in the book. "You were always glad to see Steve comin' down the hall."

He also had an impact on music, according to the author, that far transcended the recognition he received before his untimely death to leukemia 23 years ago.

"Jimmy Buffett fans think that 'Banana Republics' is a Buffett song, and it is the ultimate Buffett song. But Steve Goodman wrote it," Eals told The Associated Press.

People also still leave posts on youtube.com arguing over whether Goodman or David Allan Coe wrote "You Never Even Call Me by My Name" (in which Goodman tried to put every silly country music cliché he'd ever heard). Coe has credited Goodman for the tune he turned into a hit.

Then there are Chicago Cubs fans who sing "Go Cubs, Go" when their team wins a game at Wrigley Field. They have Goodman to thank for that, as well as for "The Dying Cub Fan's Last Request," a good-natured lampooning of the Cubs' ineptitude.

Goodman, according to Eals, wrote "Go Cubs, Go" after he was banned from singing "The Dying Cub Fan's Last Request" at Wrigley Field, a baseball stadium he held in such esteem that friends sneaked in after his death to scatter some of his ashes.

Still, nearly 800 pages for a guy with a one-hit song — and even that one was recorded by somebody else?

“Like many people, I thought of Steve Goodman and I thought, ‘OK, “City of New Orleans.”’ And I thought, ‘What else?’” says Jack David, head of Eals’ Canadian-based publisher, ECW Press of Toronto.

But when he began to read Eals’ manuscript, he was enchanted by an opening chapter recounting a 1984 performance at a small nightclub in the Midwest where Goodman, gaunt and just months from death, captivated the audience.

“It was the quality of the writing that put me in that club,” the publisher said.

As he continued to turn pages — “It took me about eight days to read the thing” — he could find almost no place to cut.

“The best thing to do was a light copyedit,” he finally decided.

The book is Eals’ second biography. His first, “Every Time a Bell Rings: The Wonderful Life of Karolyn Grimes,” is the real-life story of the little girl who played Jimmy Stewart’s youngest daughter in the 1946 film classic “It’s a Wonderful Life.” It checks in at only 297 pages.

But more than biography, “Facing the Music” is a labor of love for the 55-year-old former newspaper reporter who spent 10 years researching Goodman’s life.

“I wooed my wife with his songs,” Eals recalls during a recent interview from his home in Seattle. “I sent her tapes. I saw him perform. He was just the best.”

As he began to talk to musicians, relatives and friends who knew Goodman, he became amazed at how many lives Goodman’s music touched. Eventually, the book ballooned to include 540 photographs and an 18-track CD of songs dedicated to Goodman.

By the time he was through, Eals had constructed a portrait of the artist so complete that it includes everything from the Christmas cards his family mailed when he was a baby to the deathbed visit his old friend Buffett paid him.

When the “Margaritaville” musician pulled out a guitar and played a song he’d just written, “all the bells and whistles” connected to the lines keeping Goodman alive sounded alarms.

“I guess he didn’t like my song,” a startled Buffett said.

For his part, Eals says he came away with a lesson from that and other stories: Do what you want, do it now and do it as well as you can. Just like Goodman would have done.

“This is going to sound silly or morbid, but I feel like I can die now,” Eals says. “I feel like this is the project I was meant to do.”

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