

This review originally appeared Aug. 2, 2007, in the free weekly online magazine *FolkWax*. You can subscribe to *FolkWax* at <<http://www.folkwax.com>>.

The *FolkWax* Spotlight is on:
Steve Goodman: Facing the Music

A book by Clay Eals

FolkWax rating: “10”

By **ARTHUR WOOD**

This tome weighs a wrist-spraining 4.25 lbs (1.90 kgs), measures 10” x 8” x 1.75” (255 mm x 200 mm x 45 mm), contains 800 pages, is softback bound, and on the front cover bears the legend, “Includes 18-track CD with songs written and performed by other artists in tribute to Steve Goodman.” There’s a preface by Studs Terkel and a foreword by Arlo Guthrie, followed by 19 chapters containing over 700 pages of detailed and informative, nay, jaw-dropping, biographical text. Located midway through this book are 16 pages of colour photographs of Goodman, family, friends, and more. At the rear of the book there is a 12-page vinyl/CD discography together with a listing of Goodman related videos, books, and websites, six pages that acknowledge major and minor contributors (which is appropriately sub-titled “A Village in the Thousands” — Clay Eals interviews over 1,000 individuals) and, finally, a comprehensive 27-page alphabetic index. Phew! Thoroughly researched? Engagingly written? Covers all the bases? I’d say yes on all counts and more!

Eals’ text appears on about three-quarters of the width of each page and, consistently, on the outer edge of the page you’ll find small black-and-white captioned photographs of Goodman’s friends, acquaintances, and heroes or of a building/location or a concert or record release poster, pertinent to the musician’s life. Portraying all of the foregoing people, places, and events, larger black-and-white pictures are generously dispersed throughout the book. Also found on the aforementioned blank outer edge

are quotations in bold print accompanied by the name of the person responsible, as well as, in smaller print, insightful footnotes relevant to part of the narrative on that page.

Just in case you’re unfamiliar with Goodman’s story, here’s a quick résumé. Steve Goodman was born on July 25, 1948, and raised on the North Side of Chicago. While still attending college, aged 20, he began performing in public at the Earl Pionke-owned legendary venue Earl of Old Town. Diagnosed with leukemia at the age of 21, undaunted, Goodman steadfastly, with fortitude and humour, decided to pursue his musical muse while concurrently battling the disease for the ensuing decade and a half. Public awareness of Goodman’s illness only became public knowledge during the final years of his life. Goodman died on September 20, 1984, at the University of Washington Hospital in Seattle, Washington.

During the intervening 15 years, he was discovered in the spring of 1971 by Kris Kristofferson/Paul Anka —the same day Goodman magnanimously dragged Kristofferson and Anka to hear John Prine sing some of his songs. Goodman released 10 albums of original material [See Note 1] consecutively for Buddha Records, Warners/Asylum Records, and latterly for his own Red Pajamas imprint. While the majority of the songs he recorded were self-penned, he co-wrote with many of his contemporaries including John Prine, Jimmy Buffett, David Amram, Shel Silverstein [d. 1999], Jimmy Ibbotson/Jeff Hanna (Nitty Gritty Dirt Band), and Michael Peter Smith, and also

covered songs written by Prine, Smith, Dan Penn/Donnie Fritts, even Rodgers & Hart, and more.

At the 30th Annual Grammy Awards in early 1988, the posthumously released, 11th original, Goodman recording “Unfinished Business” won him his second Grammy in the category Best Contemporary Folk Recording. Sadly, Goodman was awarded his first Grammy soon after his passing. “City of New Orleans,” performed by Willie Nelson, picked up the Grammy for Best Country Song at the 27th Annual Grammy Awards during early 1985. In the last quarter of a century, “Unfinished Business” apart, Red Pajamas have posthumously released the two-CD, studio/live retrospective “No Big Surprise” and a trio of live recordings. A lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, some of Goodman’s ashes were sprinkled near the left-field bleachers at Wrigley Field and the remainder at Doubleday Field in Cooperstown, New York, the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. Steve Goodman is survived by his wife, Nancy, and three daughters, Jesse, Sarah, and Rosanna. Let me point out that the foregoing is, as I stated at the outset, only a brief, at best, career resume.

Clay Eals is a Seattle, Washington-based, writer/journalist and *Steve Goodman: Facing The Music* took him eight, obviously painstaking, years to complete. Further details about the Goodman book can be found at <<http://www.clayeals.com>>, and on that website there are sections featuring bonus photos and corrections (i.e., errata) to the text or captions in the current printing of the book.

Fronted by a full-page replica of the poster for the event, Chapter 1 furnishes a detailed account of one of Goodman’s final public performances, on May 21, 1984, at Parody Hall in Kansas City. Spread over 19 pages, the intimacy of detail that Eals embraces most surely points to the existence of a live recording of the concert. The point is, however, as Eals’ text amply reveals, that a mere four months prior to his passing,

Goodman was still capable of joshing and joking with his audience and performing his songs in the focused and driven fashion that was his career’s trademark. The Grim Reaper may have visibly been standing to the side of the stage that evening, but to Goodman he was just another audience member that was there to be entertained. According to Eals, ever the optimist, Goodman’s final words that night were, “Well, thank you, I hope to get to play for you again some night.”

From Chapter 2 onward, Eals reverts to a chronological account of Steve Goodman’s life from his birth to his passing and beyond. As well as exploring his family and musical life, Eals weaves in the history of the times, including insight into national and local events in which Goodman participated.

Okay, time now to take a look at the aforementioned 19-track, 18-song tribute CD. The duration approaches 76 minutes, while contributors hail from North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Three pages featuring pictures of many of the performers and notes regarding each song and its singer appear in the closing pages of the book. Recorded in 1979, Jay Haynes [d. 1983] delivers a piano instrumental rendition of Michael Smith’s evergreen “The Dutchman,” a song that Goodman instilled on America’s consciousness. Some of the songs directly reference Goodman and events in his life (“Phil Ochs, Bob Dylan, Steve Goodman, David Blue and Me” by John Wesley Harding, “The Man with the Golden Tune” by Peter Weisz, and “Song for Steve Goodman” by Eddie Walker), others reference clubs that Goodman performed in (“This Is for Lena’s Café” by Pierce Pettis). A few are more universal in intent/content (“Flying with the Angels” by Jeff Jaisun was recorded the night after Goodman passed, “No Choice” by Buddy Mondlock reflects on the irresistible pull of Goodman’s muse). The disc closes with “Steve Goodman Audio Clips” recorded by DJ John Platt (formerly of Chicago’s WXRT-FM and currently WFUV-FM

in New York) and a number of the latter focus on Goodman's song "City of New Orleans."

Kansas City-bred and Nashville-based for a number of years, Jeff Black's "One Last Day to Live" appeared on his album *Honey & Salt* [2003] released by the German label Blue Rose Records. With Black's permission, I'd like to quote one of the verses:

*If you had one last day to live
And your soul was free from fear
Would you kill that monster now, dead
Would you race the summer wind
Write a song that does not rhyme
Get stoned and sail the sea*

(Jeff Black, 2003, lyric used with the permission of Lotos Nile Music BMI. You can read the full lyric at <<http://www.jeffblack.com/honeylyrics.html>>.

For almost half his life and pretty much all of his adult years, Goodman battled with a monster and would calmly refer to himself as "Cool Hand Leuk" [See Note 2]. I think it's fair to say that, relative to the foregoing rhyme, Steve Goodman accomplished it all and more, and Eals' grist-laden [See Note 3] biography relates the story of this musician in *Wide Screen Technicolor* complete with Surround Sound.

In his stocking feet Steve Goodman stood a mere five-foot, two-inches tall, but, musically

speaking, this regular guy from Chicago was a giant. Back in the early 1970s Joan Baez dubbed Goodman "Chicago Shorty." Once you've read this book and doubtless had your appetite whetted for some aural Steve Goodman, if you don't own one of his albums go avail yourself of the whole catalogue today. Thankfully all of Steve Goodman's solo recordings remain in print. And if you already own a couple of Goodman's discs, then go pick up the ones you don't own.

NOTES

Note 1: Steve Goodman's 10th album, "Santa Ana Winds," was a late-1984 release appearing shortly after his passing.

Note 2: The nickname is a play on the title of the 1967 Oscar-nominated prison movie "Cool Hand Luke," which starred Paul Newman.

Note 3: Anyone familiar with the legendary 1960s/1970s U.K. music publication *ZigZag* will instantly recognize the term, "grist." It was strictly reserved for a song or the contents of an album that were exceptional. Frankly, Eals' work is way beyond exceptional and has set the biographical bar at a whole new level.

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