

Bio gives music to a singer's life

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Press-Telegram Staff Writer Al Rudis was a friend of Seal Beach composer-musician Steve Goodman. In this very personal reflection, he assesses a new biography of Goodman and remembers a great talent lost.

*For the first time since he died
Late last night I cried
I wondered when I was going to do that
For my old man.*
— “My Old Man,” by Steve Goodman

By Al Rudis, Staff Writer

It took me 23 years to cry for Steve Goodman. It happened when I was reading Page 637 of Clay Eals' biography, “Steve Goodman: Facing the Music.”

On that page, Eals tells of a meeting that Goodman and his wife, Nancy, had with Cathy Turley, a young teacher at McGaugh Elementary School in Seal Beach. Their daughter, Sarah, sometimes disrupted her third grade class by telling a joke at inappropriate times.

When Turley met with the Goodmans, she told them, “She’s a neat kid, but if she keeps cracking jokes at the wrong time, she could find herself in a bit of trouble.”

That’s when Steve told her that he was dying of leukemia and that they were “training Sarah to laugh at the serious stuff.”

Turley was stunned. And she told Eals the conversation changed her life because it made her see the value of lightening up.

When Goodman died in 1984, I attended the tribute concert at the Pacific Amphitheatre in Costa Mesa and heard John Prine, Jimmy Buffett, Willie Nelson, Jackson Browne, Kris Kristofferson, Emmylou Harris, Randy Newman and others sing his songs.

After that, I stopped listening to my Goodman albums. My family and I were friends with the Goodman family, and we saw them a few more times. Nancy firmly put her thumb down on making the tribute concert an annual event and told us and everyone else that she didn’t intend to be a “rock and roll widow.”

The next thing we knew, she and her three daughters had moved from Seal Beach to New York and started a new life. We had no more contact, and I have to admit that I both admired her for her move and was somewhat relieved. Without his music and without the Goodmans around, it was easier to avoid the dark cloud of sadness that enveloped me whenever I thought about Goodman.

Then a few years ago, I got a call from Eals. He said he was writing a biography of Goodman, and he asked me if I would help him. I loaned him some cassette tapes of interviews I did with Goodman when I was working in Chicago. Those allowed him to hear Goodman talking a little about his life and music.

Eals told me he was getting information from more than 1,000 people who had had some contact with Goodman during his brief life (he died at 35), and I was skeptical.

Early doubts

Since Goodman was never a superstar and since he had died many generations of pop music ago, I doubted that there was a lot of interest in a biography of him now, especially something that involved the kind of research Eals was doing. I figured Eals was one of those obsessed music fans I occasionally ran across who collected a lot of data but never did anything with it.

Sure enough, several years passed, and I heard no more about the Goodman project other than occasional e-mails from Eals talking about some more people he had interviewed. I was sure there was never going to be a book.

Then last year, Eals shocked me with the information that not only had he finished the book and had found a publisher, but the publisher was interested in releasing the entire book, all 778 pages. (Recently, I was surprised again when the book’s first printing sold out and it went into a second printing.)

When I received my reviewer’s copy, it was like getting a paperback version of “War and Peace.” It weighed a ton and was so intimidating that I didn’t start reading it for a few weeks.

This book is not a biography but a history, like the history of the Roman Empire.

Although it’s about the life of Steve Goodman, the book is also about the neighborhoods of Chicago when Goodman was growing up there. It’s about his strange and wonderful connection to John Prine and the ‘70s Chicago folk scene that they ruled.

Goodman’s struggle for success on a national level illuminates the whole world of pop music and the industry that creates and markets it. And his story is also the history of the United States in the Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras.

Sharing grief

For me, it was also personal. When I read it, it was like sitting shiva. In Jewish custom, after someone dies, friends visit the departed’s survivors for seven days to comfort them.

During that time, they don’t try to distract from the grief, but instead talk about the deceased in detail, telling reminiscences of their experiences. At the end of the seven days, the mourning is thorough and complete.

As I slowly read through Eals book, all the friends and acquaintances of Steve Goodman told me how Steve touched their lives.

Some were touched by his songs, songs about a train ride in “The City of New Orleans” or shady Caribbean expatriates in “Banana Republics” or the frustrations of baseball loyalty in “A Dying Cub Fan’s Last Request” or country songs in “You Never Even Call Me by My Name.”

Not all of them were as well-known as these, but there were many more great ones, literate, honest, humorous and moving in turn, or sometimes all at once.

In addition to writing great songs, Goodman was a master performer. He was born with a great tenor voice, but he learned to be a great entertainer. Year by year, he got better and better.

He was so good that during the years when Steve Martin was a comedy superstar, he chose Goodman to open many of his shows. The comedian knew that though his fans had little patience for opening acts, Goodman, who was mostly unknown to them, was not only unintimidated but would have them in the palm of his hand by the time he left the stage.

Some, like Cathy Turley, were affected by personal encounters with a man who shook their world. We’ve all heard the admonition to live every day like it might be our last, but for Goodman this was not a fanciful idea. Eals shows him as a human being with the same frailties that the rest of us have, except that he also knew he would probably die soon.

Advice, kindness

How he dealt with this wasn’t always pretty, but in most cases it pushed him beyond being a good person into being a great one. His wise advice, selfless acts of kindness and, most of all, his loyalty to family and friends were, and still are, anomalies in the cutthroat music business.

As I read the testimony, I mourned for Steve Goodman, but I was also reminded of his sparkling personality and immense talent. I learned about the origins of his wonderful songs, and once again, they played in my mind. I learned how little I knew him, because he had never told me of his days as a soloist in the synagogue choir or how the entertainment bug infected him or his brief college exploits.

I’d guess that maybe 60 percent of the book was new to me.

The mourning lasted for weeks, as I digested the immense book in small bites. At first, I was worried that Eals was going to wallow in the tragedy, but except for a the opening chapter and the last few pages, this is a book about life at its most unpredictable, emotional and powerful, not about death.

When I finished, I felt exhilarated. The weight on my shoulders had transferred into the weight of the book. I realized how lucky I was to have known such a person, even if only the last 10 years of his life, and now I can face the memories and music once again.

Give him a listen

If you are thinking about reading the book and worried about how long it is, that means you probably have never heard Goodman’s music.

In that case, don’t buy the book right away. Instead, buy an album like “No Big Surprise: the Steve Goodman Anthology” listen to it. Once the amazing songs on that album find a place in your heart, you’ll be eager to read the book.

Or stop by Borders in Los Altos or Seal Beach Music this Saturday and listen to some talented musicians perform their Goodman tributes while the author signs copies of the book.

If you are already a Goodman fan, you are going to like the book, but I suggest reading it a few pages a day and savoring the story while you replay your Goodman albums.

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Q&A with Goodman biographer Clay Eals

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Goodman biographer Clay Eals on the movie, the ordeal and the lesson

While he was on the road promoting his book and shortly after he returned home, author Clay Eals sat down at his computer for this e-interview with staff writer Al Rudis:

When they make a movie of your book, they're not going to have to "base it on a true story," because this true story is more dramatic than fiction. I can see Jack Black collecting an Oscar as Steve. Who would play Kris Kristofferson, Paul Anka, John Prine, Steve Martin and Jimmy Buffett?

Jack Black has a close resemblance but also an ingrained persona that could turn away those seeking a serious biopic. I would lean toward an unknown to play Steve. For Kris Kristofferson, a good fit might be Val Kilmer. For Anka, how about Joaquin Phoenix with a faux receded hairline? Not coming up with anyone for Prine, but it would have to be someone sleepy-eyed who could chain-smoke and sing with a sandpaper voice. Steve Martin? How about Weekend Update anchor Seth Meyers from "Saturday Night Live"? He could manage the same manic eyes and goofy smile. As for Buffett, maybe Jason Lee..

One of the best things about the movie will be that, unlike "Walk the Line," most people going to see it won't know any of the songs except maybe "City of New Orleans." They're going to be blown away, and the soundtrack is going to be a huge hit. Of course, then there's the big problem: Should they use Steve's recordings or let some egocentric actor imitate him?

That's a tough question. Lip-synching, no matter how skilled, is usually noticeable. Then again, who could imitate Goodman's unique voice? I would favor whatever solution presents Steve as accurately as possible.

One of the things that makes Steve Goodman so real in your book, and the people in his life, too, is the occasional pettiness, jealousy, nastiness and meanness. You don't look away, for instance, from John Fahey's devastating put-down. Why did you include all the ugliness since you obviously admire Goodman?

The easy tendency would have been to portray Goodman as a saint. Not only did sources hold a nearly uniform admiration and affection for him, but readers' sympathy also lies inherently with someone who died young and lived with death on his shoulder for his entire adult life.

But I believe that any subject of a biography is more believable — and endearing — if the person's faults and lapses are part of the story. Perfection is a chilly proposition. Perhaps ironically, imperfections give a person's strengths deeper value. So yes, I went out of my way to portray Goodman completely, and I am grateful to those who shared with me a more balanced set of memories.

How did you keep your narrative from getting morbid when death is the second most important character in the book?

That's an easy one. The answer is that death equals life. In other words, death gives life meaning. Life can be deeply rich, meaningful and satisfying, in large part because we are living it in the face of death. That's the lesson that Goodman gave us. It's the lesson implicit in the book's title.

What made you write this book?

Steve Goodman underwent a last-ditch bone-marrow transplant and died at University of Washington Medical Center in August-September 1984. I was editor of the West Seattle Herald at the time, and I wrote a tribute/obituary on him for our chain's entertainment section, so I think the seeds were sewn then. Later in 1995-96, a biography I wrote and self-published on Karolyn Grimes (Zuzu in "It's a Wonderful Life") let me cut my teeth on that genre.

I just felt that Goodman deserved a book. In fact, it was a crying need. Why write the 50 th book on Elvis? Publishers generally don't want us to know anything about anyone we don't already know about, because they think it won't sell. Fortunately, ECW Press bucked the trend and not only took a chance on Goodman but also gave all of us the book that I felt he deserved.

I really felt I had to do this book before I died. And now I feel fortunate to have accomplished a mission singular to me.

Didn't you run up against a wall of silence from suspicious family, friends and Steve's manager, Al Bunetta? How did you overcome that?

There was no wall of silence from Goodman's friends, and from the beginning I had the participation of Steve's oldest daughter, Jessie, as well as a dozen other more distant family members.

But yes, for six years Al Bunetta would not agree to an interview, and several key family members — Steve's mom, Minnette; Steve's widow, Nancy (now

remarried for 15-plus years); Steve's brother, David; and Steve's younger daughters, Sarah and Rosanna — never did allow themselves to be interviewed. I don't know their reasons (perhaps I was seen as an outsider, and perhaps their memories were too painful), but I respect their decisions.

Why did Bunetta relent? A growing chorus of musical sources — unbidden by me — kept calling Al and asking him to participate, and those voices probably had an effect. But Al was between a rock and a hard place, wanting to aid a serious biography of Steve but also wanting to respect Nancy's wishes. Al finally agreed to talk, and I interviewed him for eight hours over three days in September 2005 in Nashville. As he told me, "I figured the book wouldn't be any better without me."

It's important to note that while I was not able to interview Minnette, Nancy, David, Sarah and Rosanna, they are far from absent from the book. They are captured in many comments and anecdotes from others, as well as in material quoted from printed sources. Some of the most revealing and touching anecdotes and insights directly involve these people, and I couldn't have done justice to Steve's life without them.

Also, I was determined to complete the book regardless of who participated. It was important to me to get as many Goodman-related memories down while it was still possible — that is, while the sources were still alive and lucid. Sadly, several sources have died since I interviewed them, but I take comfort in knowing that they felt good about sharing their memories regardless of whether they would see the finished product.

How long did you spend on the book?

The book took more than eight years of solid, full-time effort, starting in January 1999, and a lot of that effort was research. I knew that this would possibly be the only book ever done on Goodman, so I had the mantle on my shoulders to do it right, which, to me, meant making it comprehensive. I was driven, even in the face of financial and family challenges of my own.

Did you have a job?

In 1999, I went half time (a week on, a week off) at my day job at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center so that I could travel to do interviews. In 2003, I quit the Hutch entirely to finish the book in what I thought would take two more years but stretched out to four. My backbone the entire way was my wife, Meg, a former journalist who understood the book's value as both a personal project and a contribution to the world. If she hadn't held a day job the past nine years, the book would not have happened.

How did you find the people to talk to?

It's detective work, and these days the Internet is a tremendous aid. But the real tool was the list of people I had already interviewed. It became my credibility, so I was constantly adding names to the list and presenting it when I made interview requests. I also was fortunate to have so many referrals from people who knew Goodman. In fact, it was a blessing and a curse, all in one. At the end of nearly every interview, I would hear, "You've also got to talk to X, Y and Z." In this seemingly endless process, I tried to chase down all the leads.

A lot of struggling musicians are going to relate to one of the themes running through your book: Just because you have talent, write great songs, are a decent human being and even know some big stars who try to help you, it doesn't mean you are ever going to find the mass audience and superstardom you deserve. But you can still find a way to live a life of dignity and leave something valuable behind. Is this what Steve's life proves?

Something I wrote in the introduction applies here: "Fame is a misleading measure of greatness." So, sure, I agree with your premise.

But I think the underlying lesson of Goodman's life — one that transcends music and the entire entertainment industry — is that however we all got here, we are not meant to be hermits. We are meant to connect with, engage and inspire other people. Goodman connected with more people in his 36 years than most of us will in twice that time, if we live that long.

It's not just about numbers, though. Goodman truly engaged others. People who encountered him felt that the time they spent was real and enduring, not superficial and fleeting. If you dig into that lesson more deeply, it's about living life truly in the moment, living with the full awareness of death, not taking life for granted. It's the basic message of mortality, and it's in Steve's song "You Better Get It While You Can."

The verb "get" in the song doesn't mean "acquire," but rather "understand" or "comprehend" or even "do." It's this message that I hope is transmitted throughout the book — and that therefore will open the book to a greater audience than just those who knew or knew of Goodman. Because we are all "facing the music."

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