

The following is a slightly edited transcript of a phone interview that I did with Kris Kristofferson on Oct. 19, 2001, for my Steve Goodman biography. I had been chasing the interview for nearly two years by staying in touch with Kris' longtime manager and friend, Vernon White, which made what I learned in the first few seconds of the call all the more shocking. Here is the transcript. — Clay Eals

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*This is Clay Eals. I'm the guy doing the Steve Goodman book, and I was told by Vernon that this would be a good time to talk with you about Steve for awhile. Is this still OK?*

Uh, I guess you hadn't gotten the news that Vernon died last night.

*What?*

Yeah.

*Oh, my god.*

It was pretty stunning to me. He was more of my best friend.

*Yeah, he's been with you for a long time.*

Oh, yeah.

*Awful long time. My god. I was just talking with him three times yesterday.*

Yeah, I was myself. I did every day.

*Oh, man.*

So my first thought was to tell you I just can't do the interview right now, but my wife said it might be better to go ahead and get it done because it would be hanging over my head. So I don't mind talking with you.

*Are you sure?*

You have to understand where I'm coming from.

*OK.*

OK.

*Man.*

It's just that he was a wonderful man, he's got a great little boy, and it was a total shock.

*How did it happen?*

He died in his sleep.

*Well, at least there's that, but there wasn't any way of foreseeing.*

His ex-wife, who is a doctor, told me that she thought he had a massive heart attack.

*Oh, boy. Oh, man. He just seemed like such a nice guy when I've dealt with him.*

Oh, he was a wonderful person and helped me out considerably in the last 30 years, and it's just a shock to my system. But Steve Goodman was also a shock, a bit earlier.

*No kidding. Well, I appreciate you taking the time to do this. I mean, you're a key source for the book. I've interviewed hundreds of others and prepared for talking with you because you were there for some of the most crucial points of Steve's career 30 years ago.*

Yeah, well, it was really a magical time, when things like that could happen.

*It was kind of a magical time for you as well.*

Well, it was. It was a thing, you would see something that was worth succeeding, and you could help it succeed, and it worked. In the case of Steve, I met him at, we were working a club together, called the Quiet Knight.

*That's right, on Belmont.*

Yeah, and I was really in rough shape. I might have had walking pneumonia back then. Whatever it was, I wasn't feeling great, but I was so knocked out by this kid who was playing right ahead of us, and he was singing a particular one song that I loved, well, I loved "City of New Orleans," but he would sing this "Sam Stone," and I told him, "Goddamn, that's a great song," and he said, "You gotta hear the guy that wrote it," and it turned out to be his best friend, y'know, John Prine. What was funny was, Paul Anka was working some fancy place (the Palmer House) at the same time we were working, but I had run into him on the airplane on the way over, and he told me he was singing one of my songs. It was "Help Me Make it Through the Night," and he came over to our club in a tuxedo one night, and it happened to be the night that we were finishing, so he and Steve and I think it was Samantha Eggar.

*Along with Melvin van Peebles and Lola Falana.*

Really? All I remember is that it was a very small group, and the club was closed when we got there, the Earl of Old Town, and they woke John up, and he proceeded to just destroy us song by song. And Steve Goodman had been raving about him. It turned out they were just like brothers. I never saw one of them without the other after that.

But what was fortunate, we had been at Paul Anka's penthouse. Paul said to ask Steve if he would be willing to be flown, and Paul would buy him a plane ticket, flying to New York, and talk about publishing. There was a big bowl of fried chicken, and Steve said, "Would you like to see a short, fat, Jewish kid dive in a bowl of fried chicken?" It was perfect.

I was working at the Bitter End. We got Paul Colby to let 'em be on my show there.

*You brought 'em up for three songs each, I think.*

Well, hell, I'm not tell you anything that you don't know then.

*Well, I've got a lot of things here I want to go through, and maybe something will pop out of your memory. Some of these things that you've just said are new to me, the idea that you and Paul ran into each other on the airplane coming into Chicago. That's how that happened.*

Yeah, that's how he happened to be over at the club that night. He got up during the show and sang a song.

*Oh, he did. Do you remember what song?*

Yeah, he sang, "Help Me Make it Through the Night." Oh, it was great. Paul Anka was a songwriter when I was just thinking about being one, and he was knocked out by Steve.

*Had you ever met or dealt with Paul Anka before that night?*

No. I met him on the airplane.

*This was a five-night gig at the Quiet Night where Steve was opening for you.*

Yes.

*April 28 through May 2, 1971.*

And Paul was working up at the, he was working at a place that was so uptown, they wouldn't let us in without our clothes, because I went over to see one of his shows, but he had come up to me on the airplane and told me he was doing one of my songs.

*It was the Empire Room, I think.*

Oh, it was?

*When Steve opened for you, this was the first time you ever met Steve?*

Yeah, yeah. We worked together many times after that, but that was the first time I'd ever seen him. I swear to God, I would never have watched him. I was so damned tired and so sick at the time. We had been working forever.

*When you talked with Anka on the plane, did you know that he was going to come to your show, or did he just show up?*

No, no. I didn't know then. I think he might have said he was coming over that night, when he did. I know he was with us when we watched John play.

*This night that Paul came in his tuxedo and sang "Help Me Make it Through the Night."*

That's the way I remember it.

*Steve obviously had hung around for your part of the show, after opening for you, because the next part that I have is that it's about 4 a.m.*

Yeah, well, Steve had been talking to me all week long. "You gotta see the guy that wrote that song." And I didn't want to see anybody, to be honest, but finally, I said, "We'll do it the last night when I'm not working the next day." And so we did. That's how it happened.

*You don't have any recollection of Melvin van Peebles and Lola Falana being there. They're not part of your group. Maybe they were part of Anka's group?*

No, I met Melvin years before or sometime before that, but that particular night, I don't remember it. I can barely remember anybody. I was probably in pretty rough shape. But I remember John Prine just absolutely scalding my brain. That was the best damn songwriter I ever saw, and they were, John is the one who probably knows Steve better than any human being.

*You had a full band there?*

I had a band. In fact, my band was the one who told me about Steve.

*To open for you?*

No, they told me that he was good. "Hey, you've got to see this guy who's playing in front of us. He's really good."

*It wasn't typical that you would see the opening act all the time.*

As tired and hung over and sick as I was, I spent as little time as possible, y'know. I'd sleep and then get up and barely make it out and then start roaring all in the same launch(?), and unfortunately, I think of those things today, and I can't imagine having the energy to stay up that late, but I'm glad I was a young kid then, or I'd have missed John, anyway.

*Samantha was with you. Was she at your show?*

I'm sure she was. I was kind of friends with her then.

*I've got two different accounts from Goodman interviews about what happened next over breakfast with Anka, and maybe you can let me know which one is more likely. The first is that Terry Paul "made" Steve play two songs for everyone over breakfast, and one of the songs was "Would You Like to Learn to Dance." A second story is that Steve says that you said to Steve, "Take out your ax and sing 'Would You Like to Learn to Dance.'" Would it have been you or Terry, or do you know?*

It's impossible to remember. I think Terry Paul really was the guy who told me first about Steve, so it would be very likely that it was Terry Paul, or it was me. I don't know. By then, I had already heard Steve and become a fan myself.

*What was it about "Would You Like to Learn to Dance" that appealed to you guys?*

Uh, it was a good song, and the emotion was right there.

*It's a showstopper, it's so quiet.*

Yeah. It's one of those things, it's like a Mickey Newbury thing, where it's particularly good because it's stated, the words and the music go perfect, and the performance is perfect, and I don't want to hear anybody else even do it.

*Only cover I've heard is by Jackie DeShannon.*

I heard from Johnny Cash that one of his big regrets, I was reading it someplace, or he told me on the highway on tour.

*It's in his autobiography.*

That he didn't do "City of New Orleans." I know he was so bullheaded. He'd decided he'd done too many train songs. He didn't even like trains, and people kept sending him train songs, and I gave him a big train from some big antique place, about the same time that I gave him that song, and he turned it down. He wishes he had done it.

*Was this really a breakfast or more of a party in his suite?*

Y'know, I've often wondered myself. I figured what the hell, I think maybe we were killing time before we went to see John.

*Well, this was late after your Saturday night show, and then it was the next night, the Sunday night, that you went to go see John after your last show.*

Well, you know better than I do. To me, all those days have run together so long ago. I can remember the primary sense at the time.

*Samantha went back to her diaries for me, and then I cross-referenced it with Chicago magazine, so I think it was over those two days.*

I've got it totally different in my head, but you're probably right.

*When you're all sitting there, are you sitting around a breakfast table?*

Nah, we were up in his, it was just a big hotel suite. There was a separate room, an anteroom, a side room where the food was.

*Was Steve the only one playing? It's not a pass-the-guitar around thing.*

Nah, I don't think so. Listen, I can't really remember.

*Anka's reaction to Steve's playing the song. He just said, "You want a plane ticket to New York?"*

Yeah. It just totally knocked him out.

*The idea was to record a demo in New York?*

Y'know, I don't know really what it was. It led into the Buddah Records contract, and he ended up doing an album down in Nashville.

*That you produced.*

I got my name on it, but I wasn't really a producer. I put him together with Norbert Putnam.

*When you're at the Earl and listening to John, it's just a few people there taking a few chairs off the tables because it's late at night and waking up John? Roger Ebert gave me this account from an interview he did with you four years later. This is you talking. "Stevie insisted we get there about the crack of dawn and here's Prine sleeping on the Goddamn floor. I mean, I was so embarrassed. I didn't want to hear anybody. They kick Prine awake and he stumbles to the mike to perform for the so-called stars, and I'm drowning my embarrassment in bourbon, and about halfway through the first song something catches my attention. And then his next song was 'Donald and Lydia.' And Goodman says that ain't nothing, wait'll you hear 'Sam Stone'." That's pretty much how you remember it from what you were saying before.*

Well, except that I had already heard "Sam Stone."

Right, because Goodman was doing that one. He played a whole raft of songs for you, I guess. Your liner notes say two dozen songs. That sounds like a lot.

He played a lot of songs, and every one of them was great. They were all of those great old songs. "Hello in There." I felt like we were at something like when somebody might have stumbled on the new Bob Dylan. It was so magic. And the whole thing went like magic. When they went to New York, they went over just terrific at the Bitter End.

*I'm almost there. Let me keep you at the Earl for a moment.*

OK.

*Steve said that you told Anka, "I guess you're buying two plane tickets." Anka was knocked out by Prine, too, right?*

I thought he was. Everyone was. He went through the songs once, and we just said, "Start over," and at that hour of the night, you never really would do something like that. It was just really magic.

*You'd heard Steve perform, and you'd heard this set of songs from Prine. Can you compare your reaction to Steve with your reaction to John? What were their relative strengths?*

To me, Steve was like a candle that burns steadily and brilliantly on stage. His guitar work and his charm, his elfin personality, y'know, was so winning to so many people. Every time I worked with him, he just absolutely won everybody's heart, I guess with a mixture of sincerity and knowledge that we all stuff of living with a death sentence.

*Did you know about Steve's leukemia diagnosis at the time?*

Yeah, I knew it from the get-go. I don't know how. Don't ask me who said it. But things like that, somebody will say it.

*I want to ask about how Steve seemed to be taking all this attention. Here's what he said in one interview: "Kris had really just come into his own: "Me and Bobby McGee" with Janis Joplin, "Help Me Make it Through the Night" was a hit, Johnny Cash had just had a big record with "Sunday Morning Coming Down," Ray Price had cut "For The Good Times" and it was a million seller, and all of a sudden, Kris was hot everywhere. It didn't matter which market you were talking about, everybody was cutting his stuff, and for good reason. The stuff was good, and it holds up. So here I was, just the local guy who got the gig by accident, the support act for five nights." Was he really that kind of aw-shucks, self-deprecating?*

He was that way till they threw dirt on him! He's always been quite humble, I think, but totally charming.

*But not an act, a put-on.*

No, no, it wouldn't be a put-on. He's so alive, I'd never even would think about the fact that he had leukemia. He was such a funny guy to be around and such a bright spirit.

Now, John was probably the best pure songwriter I'd run into in quite awhile. I'd gone from hanging out with Mickey Newbury and other great songwriters from Nashville, but this guy was something else again. So Prine's songwriting, to me, eclipsed the songwriting of everybody else from then on.

*Prine's more the songwriter, Goodman's more the performer/entertainer.*

Well, and both. He was a perfect performer of his art, of the stuff that he wrote and the emotions that he felt, and he had the tools. He had the tools of a guitar player. When he was down in Nashville, he was sitting there playing along with Grady Martin, who I had, when I was a janitor in Nashville, I'd seen Grady at every session that he was in, at Columbia's recording studio. Grady Martin was this great guitar player. He used to run all his sessions from his easy chair. He never got up. He had one that swiveled around. He'd tell me what to do. He was over there standing up playing with Steve and ended up giving him his guitar. He gave him his guitar, it was his favorite guitar, and he got to feeling bad about it later, Steve told me months later, and told me he had to have the guitar back. He just felt so awful. But it was his favorite acoustic guitar or whatever. Steve flew it back on a plane, bought it a seat and flew it back to Nashville to give it back to Grady. But he bought a seat for the guitar.

He had tremendous tools.

*Grady, spur of the moment, wanted to give him something for it.*

Yeah. It was really quite emotional.

*In New York, June, Steve and Prine fly to New York. They go straight from LaGuardia to the Village. A lot happens in just two days. You are playing at the Bitter End, and you invite Steve and John up. Apparently, there are all these record people and press in the audience. Steve said in an interview they had come to see you. You were the talk at the time. But were you aware that there would be record executives in the audience to see Steve and John?*

Oh, yeah. I knew Jerry Wexler, for example, was going to, because I was telling him about him. He was a friend of Donnie Fritts, my keyboard guy. I knew he was going to come. In fact, after he saw them in the first show, he sent his wife home in the limo and came back himself, and he signed up John for Atlantic. Things could happen like that then.

*Do you remember anything about how Goodman was signed with Buddah? Was it that night as well? Was Neil Bogart in the audience?*

It all runs together for me. To me, coming out of the Bitter End, John was on Atlantic, and Steve was on Buddah.

*Steve said it was "introduce the kids to New York shot" night. "Here are these two people from the woods. They don't realize that Chicago is a city out there." Does that description ring true?*

(He laughs.) If you've ever seen either one of them, you can imagine. Back in those days, everybody important would come and see you at the Bitter End. You might have Dylan back there in the shadows, so it was always important.

*Remember anything of what Steve and John sang that night?*

I do not. That I can remember the night at all is sometimes amazing because we did so many nights back then, but I do remember the reaction was just, it was magical, and that doesn't happen a lot.

*Did they come up early in your set and you closed it out, or did they back you up later on?*

I remember, I think, giving them a shot in the middle of it or something, or near the end. I can't really remember. But I know I had them each doing songs, and then I would probably come in and do the old songs that I do. They may have been with me. They're both better pickers than I am.

*Was Anka in the audience?*

Y'know, he may have been, he may not have been.

*The next night, Steve and John go see Anka do his nightclub show with a 27-piece orchestra at the Waldorf Astoria. Steve talks a lot about how scripted Anka's show is, down to every gesture and bead of sweat.*

Well, y'know, there was a whole different school of performing.

*Given that, what do you think Anka saw in Steve and John?*

Talent. He saw the reaction on other people. And whatever else he is, Paul's a great songwriter. He could recognize the stunning songwriting of John Prine and the effect of the performance of Steve Goodman, which was such a bright little guy in the spotlight up there. As long as he was working, it seemed to me that he would charm people that way.

*There is another part of that New York trip that you were present for, and that was when Steve and John met Bob Dylan at Carly Simon's apartment in New York, and you were there, too, I guess.*

I don't remember it. It'd be lovely to hear. I'll read your book.

*Here's what Steve said in an interview: "There I was face-to-face with the greatest musical influence in the past two years, and I was nervous. Then I looked at Kris and saw that he was nervous, and I almost went through the floor."*

(Laughs.) He was dead right, too.

*"So then we were all able to just sit around like four pickers and run through some Hank Williams tunes. ... Dylan didn't talk all that much. He said 'Donald and Lydia' is a real good tune. We talked about 'Sammy's Song' by Bromberg. Dylan played 'George Jackson.' We played 'City of New Orleans,' and Kris sang one of his new ones, and Carly wouldn't sing anything she wrote, and I was a little pissed off about that because everybody else was forced to contribute in the presence of God. The only reason I was nervous when I met Dylan is because Kristofferson was nervous. And he knew the guy. The way Kris explained was that the last time he'd talked with Dylan, there was someone else in the middle introducing him to Dylan, and they sat and talked, and there was someone else in the middle, sort of as an interpreter, someone who knew Dylan. And this time, he was the interpreter, the organizer of this little gathering. He felt a responsibility to make sure that John got to sing a couple of his songs and I got to sing a couple and we'd all had a good time, just to make sure that Dylan didn't get pissed off and split before he heard some of the tunes." Does that bring back any memory at all?*

God, it's wonderful. Yeah. I was holding my breath the whole time.

*You ever in contact with Dylan in recent years?*

It's been very brief. The last time I was face to face was at his thing he had in Madison Square Garden. But every now and then, his people are contacting mine. I was going to say call Vernon.

*Damn.*

I swear. I'm going to drop off the planet here.

*Steve said that he and John "were living in a dream, we didn't know what was happening. Did you ever see any of the Wild Bill Hickock TV Shows? The cowboy had a comical sidekick, Jingles, who was played by Andy Devine. At one point, I felt like Andy Devine to John's Wild Bill. Does that characterization ring true, Wild Bill and Jingles?*

Not at all. They were a team, there is no doubt, and he was easily up with John as far as the spirit and the humor. It was a wonderful team because they obviously loved each other so much.

*Two months later, we're down to Nashville, in August. Steve in an interview: "Nobody else would produce that record. Nobody else had any idea what to do, so finally we asked Kris. He's never produced a record and I said, "Hey, man, I hate to do this to you. You've already done everything else, but do you know any record producers by name who you could call up and talk them into taking this one?" He said, "Here's the thing, I've never done one, but I'll do it. I've got three days in August, and we'll do it with Norbert because he knows the studios and the players, and between the two of us, we'll get something." It was a chance for Kris to experiment with stuff like that, too, but he saved it because it wasn't going to happen."*

I'm glad he remembers it that way, because I've always felt a little guilty about any of the production part that I had anything to do with that Steve didn't, because I know that in his heart he would have liked to have done it himself, but for some reason my name would get things going in those days.

*You weren't as hands on as Put.*

Putnam knew what he was doing, and he's shown in his work since. He did all the real work. I would do stuff like talk to the singers. I think Billy Swan and I backed up a couple of them.

*You and Joan Baez did background vocals on "Donald and Lydia."*

Well, that's the sublime and the ridiculous together.

*How did Joan Baez get there?*

Well, I was a friend of hers at that time, and back then, y'know, it was like, if you liked somebody, you'd want them to meet somebody else that you liked. And here's another one of us.

*She just happened to be around? She was doing "Blessed Are."*

She probably was in town, and we were friends, and I'm sure that she liked their energy and Steve's songs.

*Those sessions only lasted three days.*

Pretty intense.

*That's intense for a first LP, but is that what you get when you're working with the Nashville hub there?*

Oh, in and out. If you didn't get three songs in three hours, you felt like you were not up to speed.

*About "City of New Orleans," he talks about how he couldn't get the guitar part right somehow, went out, walked around the block, when got back, the guitar part had been done by somebody else.*

Oh no.

*I don't know who did the guitar.*

It could have been Grady.

*Doesn't seem unusual in Nashville.*

Oh, god, I feel awful about it. No, it isn't. But I feel awful about it, him feeling like he was out of the process.

*He was making this reference in passing, given that the recorded version of "City of New Orleans" wasn't him playing on it. He thought it was funny, given that he played it thousands of times later.*

I know. It was his signature song.

*Steve in an interview: "Kris had never produced an album, and I was in a trance. Neither of us had the slightest idea of what we were doing." Is that true?*

Well, that certainly goes for me. I would have claimed the trance myself.

*He said, "We did the sonofabitch in three and a half days just non-stop, and the whole damn thing was a party. I don't think there was anybody who wasn't high for under 35-40 seconds of the entire record."*

Well, that sounds about right, to me. I'm sure I was drinking a lot of some cheap wine I used to drink then.

*He said, "It's amazing it sounds as good as it does. I'm serious, it's fun to look back on now, but I didn't have the slightest clue what to do. I just said, 'Great, you mean I go in there and I sing out loud? Outasight.' Put sat in the control room and played bass at the board."*

Yeah, he was a good bass player.

*It was a party aspect and a rushed feeling?*

Well, really, because my life was kind of like that in those days. It was rushed, and it was a party, and I'm sure that was an intense three days while we were in Norbert's studio there. But you could get stuff done. I don't know if a guy like Steve, I don't know if I would make it today, whatever it is.

*He said he wrote "Yellow Coat" and "The I Don't Know Where I'm Going But I'm Goin' Nowhere in a Hurry Blues" just a few weeks before going to Nashville. Do you remember other songs that impressed you besides "City of New Orleans" and "Would You Like to Learn to Dance?"*

I like all his songs. "You Never Even Call Me by My Name."

*David Allan Coe says it was backstage after a show with you, him and Prine that the idea of adding a verse to "You Never Even Call Me by My Name" came up. The added elements of mother, prison, farms, trucks and trains. (Also coffee, little white pills, ridin' the range. And the four Ds: dope, Dallas, divorce and dogs.) What do you remember of this?*

I remember there was more of Prine's words than anybody else's, about that extra verse.

*Prine disavowed the song. SG gave him a jukebox afterward.*

It's so funny. I had had a talk with David. I'd have him on my show a lot when I'd be on the road. He always seemed to show up in places I was doing a concert, and I'd put him on, and he'd knock 'em out, every time. He was a tremendous performer. He had quite a voice. But he had a problem in that, when he'd be doing a whole set of his songs, most of which he wrote, and then he'd do a couple of great versions of Mickey Newbury songs or something but not mention that it was Mickey. And I said, "Y'know, somebody out there's going to think that you're claiming that's your song, and then they're not going to believe you wrote any of those great songs." I remember him looking at me hard. And then I'm driving in the car one day, and I heard the song on the radio. Because I told him that time, "All you got to say is, my good friend Mickey Newbury wrote these songs," which is the truth, and then I heard him on the radio saying, "My good friend, Steve Goodman," I thought, my god.

*You had an impact.*

Must have.

*Steve had high regard for you. A concert quote, from 1973: "Kris finally said something good in a movie, "Blume in Love." George Segal says to him, "You're some cute guy." And Kris says to him, "Well, Hoss, you ain't no day at the beach." That's why I like Kris's movies. He plays Kris. He's the king of iambic pentameter. He's probably the best craftsman I know. Everything scans. He loves Blake so much that everything just scans. Kris's stuff is beautiful work." Did you see that kind of craftsmanship in Steve's songs?*

Well, yes. Steve was one of us, the kind of people whose mind is organized like that. We sort out our experience. What did he call it, scans? Well, of course, his do as well.

*He says, don't put down a craftsman.*

You can tell it from his guitar playing.

*Back to Steve's leukemia for a moment. I've been told that record companies at the time didn't like to sign someone to a first LP if they didn't think the person would live to make a second LP*

Oh, my god.

*Because it's the second one that really sells after the first one introduces you. Do you agree with that? Were you supposed to keep it a secret?*

No, in both cases. I never heard of that. I can imagine that a record company would be more apt to, would want their clients to be long-lived, but I can't imagine them governing, wouldn't you sign Edith Piaf or somebody who looked like they might not live?

*Yeah, so you think they would have signed Steve whether they'd know about his leukemia.*

I think they did know about it. I don't think there's much those sons-of-bitches don't know about everything. They may be listening to this phone call. But I think his talent shined through.

*It seemed like an open secret. People around him knew, but never talked about it.*

Yeah, we never talked about it. I never talked about it. Nobody in Nashville talked about it, at least at the sessions where I was around.

*Buzzy Linhart*

I recognize the name but I'm having trouble placing the face. I'm having one of those senior moments.

*Wild looking face and wild hair.*

Wait, I know Buzzy, yes. I thought I knew him. I knew him from Newport Folk Festival days.

*He said that Steve opened for him at the Quiet Knight during the same spring of 1971, and he prompted a guy from Buddah named Andy to call Neil Bogart to tell him to sign him.*

I hope he did.

*Did you get the sense that you were and Anka were the ones that really—*

I thought Anka was. I didn't have anything to do with it.

*Like the midwife*

Sort of. I showed him off. But I mean, hell, no, I didn't have anything to do with it.

*You shared the stage a few times.*

He and I were on the road a couple of times, and I can't tell you where it was. You'll find out before I will, if I ever do. I remember it was little clubs and little places that we were playing, and he always blew me off the stage, as an opening act, as a guy with only 35 or 45 minutes or so to shoot all his ammunition. I mean, can you imagine following that little son of a bitch? I had to have more courage than sense.

*You bring him back on stage when he opened for you for final songs?*

If he was around, I probably did. Seemed like we did, though, because we always liked to play together.

*You were a part of "Santa Ana Winds," there are no specific credits for each song, but the general credits say you sing background vocals, and the note for "Face on the Cutting Room Floor"*

Yeah.

*It says, "Special thanks to Kris Kristofferson, one of the greatest people in the world."*

God, that's pretty sweet.

*How did you get involved in this album?*

It was a time when I was going where I was told, kind of. Vernon probably told me I had a gig, and he drove me to it. I remember feeling like he had a sense of urgency. I felt that Steve did.

*Was there a clear sense that this would be Steve's last album?*

Nobody said anything like that, but I could feel it in him, and he died shortly after he finished it, I think.

*Was working on that album your last contact with Steve?*

Yeah.

*Do you remember hearing about his death?*

I think I had spent a long time getting ready for him to die, and when I heard about it, it had happened a long time before that. I have a way of shutting off from that stuff. I tend to deny a lot of things, but Steve was a hard one to not think about.

*He really got you as a person.*

Yeah. He was such a bright, little spirit. He glowed like a candle. I think that there's some poem that I can't begin to relate, but it's about how we're all candles of different colors, but some of them shine so brightly you can't look at 'em without blinking. That'd be Steve.

*Tribute concert Saturday, Nov. 3, 1984, at Pacific Amphitheater. You played three songs, including "Under the Gun."*

I can't remember what else I did.

*"Under the Gun" a powerful lyric, beginning with "You break a man."*

It's a little eerie now. No more time, no more chances, no more wars will be won. In the end, only the loser holds the land under the gun. That'd be what's about to happen today.

*Remember that concert at all?*

Yeah.

*Describe the mood of the place. Helped bring closure?*

Well, it was nice to see that he was appreciated.

*Full house, and all of the performers, too.*

Yeah. And, y'know, both on the stage and off. It's nice to know that you meant something.

*You'd feel fortunate to have for yourself.*

Well, yeah. I don't even like to think of tributes too much because I ain't gonna die. (Laughs.) I have come to find that they're more embarrassing if it's about you, anybody. Some people were having some birthday thing for me in Norway, and I couldn't go because I was doing a film over in Czechoslovakia, and this guy showed up, and I had to, he taped a little message that I made. I said, "Y'know, I'm really honored, but I've gotta tell you. It's different when it's for you than when it's for somebody else." I realized how bad it felt. You feel guilty because you're not there, guilty because people are asking to travel for you or whatever. But I think Steve would have appreciated that.

*You have Steve Goodman connections since 1984. The Highwaymen (Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings) you've recorded "Twentieth Century is Almost Over" and "City of New Orleans." Conscious effort to pay tribute to Steve. Whose idea?*

Listen, we all had hands in it. I can't remember whose it is, but we all are fans, y'know. I can't say who would have done it. I can't remember for the life of me, but recording "City of New Orleans" is like recording a national anthem or something, y'know. It's a standard.

*What do you like about that song?*

I like the attention to detail, to letting those details speak for themselves, and then a nice, rousing chorus that's like, "Freedom's just another word." "Good morning, America, how are you?" I mean, God almighty. They ought to be playing that at ballgames, and for guys like Willie or Johnny Cash, those old guys, they stand for the country. They're like guys up on Rushmore.

*Willie describes it as an anthem. He said that's the most important part of the song, right there.*

Yeah.

*At a Willie concert, the house lights go up, and everybody cheers.*

Oh, yeah.

*It's more of an affirmation.*

Yeah, absolutely, and it's all in that line, "Good morning, America, how are you? Don't you know me, I'm your native son?"

*Willie pointed out powerful words "your native son."*

Yeah, it's just enough.

*How often do you perform as a musician?*

I haven't been on the road since I went out about a year ago for a couple of weeks with Steve Bruton and a couple of guys, and I enjoyed it, but my family has got me by the hand right now. I got five little kids in the house. I knew that I was kind of over it when I turned down a gig with Willie. It was supposed to be starting out in Copenhagen or something that I would have been dying to go and do, but I couldn't get away from the house.

*Do you ever perform any of Steve's songs?*

No, I don't do anybody's songs, really. I've done some of John's, but he may be the only guy outside of myself that I've sung, because I usually figure the only reason I'm up there is because I'm a writer, not my pipes, and Steve could tell you, it sure as hell isn't my picking.

*Prine joke about his throat surgery: "Have you heard me sing?"*

(Laughs.) One time, I used to front Willie on one tour, and he'd come out on the stage during my show, and we'd sing a song together or something, and he was coming out one night when I was having throat trouble, and I had laryngitis, and I said, "I'm glad you're here. I'm losin' my voice." He said, "How could you tell?" He's too quick.

*I appreciate the time.*

Well, it's kind of let me go through a shock period here without thinking.

*That may be therapeutic in a way.*

Yeah.

*My timing couldn't have been worse.*

No, we're all in shock about it, but I loved Steve, and I'd love to read what you write about him.

We got some sort of e-mail thing, but I don't even go near the computers.

He's the reason I'm still pulling for the Cubbies.

Yes.

OK.

*Talk to you later, Kris. Thanks so much.*

Yeah.

*OK, bye-bye.*

Bye-bye Clay.