

Here is Chapter One of
Steve Goodman: Facing the Music



Maple Byrne, who had logged several hundred shows as the road manager for Steve Goodman, including Steve's openers for Steve Martin, put extra effort into creating this freehand, red-and-blue poster for Steve's May 21, 1984, show at Parody Hall in Kansas City, Byrne's home base at the time.

(Poster courtesy Maple Byrne)

'Glad you're alive — spread it around'

Death will take center stage tonight.

The audience knows it. So does the entertainer. Both may hint at it, but no one plans to admit it outright.

For despite its eerie unpredictability, this death will rattle with joy, see nearly everything with wit and breathe life into mortality.

Or so everyone hopes.

* * *

The sun — the world's unforgiving timekeeper — is setting on the day's 82-degree swelter. Dozens of thirty-somethings eat the last bites of their restaurant dinners in the bustling, historic Westport district, climb into their cars and drive 10 blocks west to join scores of others from all over Kansas City for an 8 o'clock show.

Cruising through mostly residential Midtown, along the West 39th thoroughfare, less than a block past the busy, six-lane Southwest Trafficway, they pass the Nichols Lunch truck stop, a corner liquor store, a 24-hour escort service and the Stooges Three bar. They pull into an insurance-company parking lot on the north side of 39th, across the street from a dilapidated, 1930s-era building. Once a movie theater, the edifice sports a second floor that has evolved from a ballroom to a dinner theater and, finally, to a music club named Parody Hall.

An outpost to the hipper Westport, the club is close enough to share some of its traffic, yet removed enough to feel down-home. The top of its façade bears gentle, serpentine curves, peaking at the midpoint. Just below the roofline, inset in a faded, yellow brick face, a pair of steel-framed casement windows and a large picture window, all painted dark, look out over 39th. At street level, to the left of the entrance to a beauty school on the first floor, stands a wooden door. Topped by the address numbers "811" and a striped awning, a backlit "Parody Hall" sign beckons like a glowing lampshade in the hazy dusk.

Inside, concertgoers climb a narrow, carpeted stairway patched with frayed duct tape. On the second-story landing, they pay the \$8 cover fee and step through a curtained door into a room that has the comfy feel of a pair of shabby slippers. To the right, they see 14 rows of worn church pews positioned in front

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Welcome to where
you are right now.

MARTIN MULL

of bass speaker cabinets that support a slightly elevated stage. Before finding seats, they step left around a few scattered wooden chairs to the bar to place orders for bottles of Busch chilling in yellow, plastic, 40-gallon barrels of ice or imported brews in grey, 10-gallon ice buckets. Other fare includes draught beer, wine and liquor, along with paper bowls of stale popcorn and beer nuts.

Ceiling fans rotate to keep the muggy air moving, while two yardstick-sized blowers, mounted in window openings on the wall opposite the stage, loom motionless and silent, poised to vent smoke and heat.

The legal capacity of the room is about 130, and at times it draws twice that number (along with the local fire marshal). On this night, a standing-room-only crowd of 200 quickly fills all the available seats, setting drinks on the narrow shelves provided by the pew backs. Some have shown up merely for an enjoyable evening of music, but many others comprehend the ephemeral, even precious nature of the moment.

It's Monday night, May 21, 1984, in a time-beaten, character-filled, upstairs club in the geographical heart of America.¹ Backstage and unseen by the crowd, with as many as 2,000 concerts behind him, stands the headliner, a balding, 35-year-old Chicago native who hasn't played a show in Kansas City in two years and who sits quietly, sipping on a green bottle of Heineken.

Shortly before 8, some in the crowd notice the presence of singer/songwriter Beth Scalet, a 34-year-old local folk favorite who was enlisted just a few hours earlier to be the opening act. She walks into the wings and, unseen by the audience, asks the headliner if it's OK if she sings his song "Lookin' for Trouble" in her set.

"Well, that'd be really cool," he tells her. "I'd like to hear it."

John Hughes, music writer for the *Kansas City Star*, peeks backstage to chat with the headliner, who allows that he's a little tired.

"But I'm here," he adds, "so you can't beat that."

Moments later, as Scalet takes the stage with her guitar and the audience focuses its attention on her bluesy, low-voiced 40-minute solo set, the headliner slips inconspicuously into the room, walks past the bar and leans on the back wall to watch and hear her perform. Before Scalet ends her closing song and the house lights come up for a 20-minute break, he steps back into the wings.

About 9:10, the lights dim, and the audience hushes, expecting a live performer, the main act, to appear onstage. Instead, however, a film starts to flicker on a 9-foot-wide, 6-foot-high white screen.

"Welcome to where you are right now," intones the image of the mustachioed film and TV actor and novelty songwriter Martin Mull.

Dressed in a dark-blue coat, light-blue shirt and red tie, Mull sits at a desk in his Los Angeles home, an ashtray to his right and a rubber duck to his left. The Parody Hall audience snickers as he assumes the role of a cinematic master of ceremonies:

"Tonight, you'll be joining me in enjoying some of the finest music ever to be made in the United States of America: the music, the words, the laughter,

1: The detailed description of Parody Hall in spring 1984 comes largely from its proprietor at the time, Tracy Leonard.

the fun of Mister” — he pauses to read from a 4-by-6 card in his hands — “Steve Goodman.”

The crowd roars with cackles and hoots at Mull, his voice saturated with the smarmy enthusiasm of a game-show host.

Mull backhandedly alludes to Goodman's lack of a recording contract despite having generated two Buddha LPs and five for Asylum, and his decision to issue a pair of current albums on a newly born, home-grown label.

“I know, as happens with so many people,” Mull says, “that at the end of tonight's performance your hearts will be so filled with that music, you're going to say, ‘Gosh, I wish I could take it home with me. Why doesn't he have a record available?’ Well,” he says, punching the air with his left index finger and winking his left eye, “I've got good news for you. He does.”

The crowd continues to howl, and Mull, a smirk planted on his face, presses on.

“If you're sitting here, in a concert hall more than likely, that record is available immediately after the performance, in the lobby. If you're in a nightclub, perhaps you might want to ask your waiter person, ‘Where's the darn record?’ Or, if you're in a gym, again very likely, I'll bet the coach knows where it is.”

More bursts of laughter.

“It's a wonderful record. I've heard it and loved it many, many times,” Mull says. “But why take my word for it? Hell, I'm a comedian, not a singer. Let's ask some people who are actually, really performing artists, people like Jimmy Buffett and Bonnie Raitt.”

The film cuts to the two popular singers, who often shared the stage with Goodman and, in Buffett's case, wrote half a dozen songs with him. Raitt, in a short haircut and a short-sleeved sweater, and Buffett, in sunglasses and a blue baseball jacket, sit on an outdoor stairway at Hollywood's SIR Rehearsal Studios, in muted discussion of how Steve has secured their celluloid appearance.

“Is he paying you anything to do this?” Buffett asks.

“He said he would,” Raitt responds. “He said he'd be delighted.”

“How much?”

“Well, it's hard to tell whether, with Steve —”

“No, I want to know how much, because I know what he offered me. I want to know what he offered you.”

“I told him to call my agent.”

Back to Mull at his desk, where a filter cigarette smolders in the ashtray. He invokes another Goodman compatriot, singer/songwriter Jackson Browne, whose shorthaired, confused visage looks to either side in his studio loft in downtown Los Angeles and turns to the camera, saying only:

“Steve Goodman — who's that?”

More laughter. The film cuts to the poker face of the “Wild and Crazy Guy” with whom Goodman performed more than 200 shows, Steve Martin. In a tan shirt and white sweater vest, the grey-haired comedian sits calmly, his hands folded atop a desk in his office.

**Steve Goodman —
who's that?
JACKSON BROWNE**

**I knew Steve Goodman
when he was a tall woman.**

STEVE MARTIN

"I knew Steve Goodman," Martin deadpans, "when he was a tall woman."

The house erupts as Mull introduces comedian and movie actor/director Carl Reiner, shown in a black sweater, light shirt and tie and sitting at the same desk. Reiner, who has just wrapped work with Steve Martin on the film "The Man with Two Brains," had incorporated a Goodman song in his previous Martin movie, "Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid." He looks exasperated.

"Hold it, hold it, hold it! There's sound out there. We're shooting in here!" Reiner shouts with irritation at someone off-screen. He turns to the camera, brightens to a brassy smile and says:

"Steve Goodman was the first Muppet to make it on his own."

More howls.

Mull announces, "Jacqueline Onassis." He glances to his right. A look of surprise fills his face. "No? OK," he says.

Steve Martin reappears on the screen.

"A lot can happen in three years," he says. "Steve Goodman used to open my show for me when I was on the road. Now I'm a big movie star, and Steve is headlining at this dump."

Laughter ripples again as the film cuts back to Mull.

"Well, there you have it. They said it better than I could. And I know what you're probably thinking. You're thinking, 'Martin's only doing this because he's got a piece of the action.' Don't be silly. If you think 48 cents an album is a piece of the action, 52 in Canada, you're crazy. I'm doing this because I love Steve's music and always have.

"In fact, hey, let's quit talkin' here," he says, thrusting an outstretched thumb off-screen like a hitchhiker, "and let's get him onstage. Let's go get Steve right now, get him out there and perform. See you later."

Gales of laughter, cheers, shouts of "Yee-hah!" and applause wash through the room. A spotlight switches on. With a huge guitar strapped around his 5-foot-2 frame and perspiration beading on his deeply dimpled forehead, Steve walks onstage and up to the single microphone, strumming a couple of chords. Once again, as on a hundred other nights over the past year, the 2-minute-and-19-second video "testimonial" has done its job. The film's faint praise — truth layered within the jest — certainly fits this performer. Over the years, he has galvanized audiences from the dozens to the tens of thousands, but somehow he hasn't reached the status of a household word.

Without a spoken greeting, Steve launches into the song that put him on the nation's musical map, the one with the "Good mornin', America, how are ya" chorus that everyone knows, the train tune called "City of New Orleans." And from the first chords, more than a few sense that something is different. The song's tempo is half a beat slower than Steve usually plays it, and he omits his customary instrumental break between the second and third verses. More striking, the diminutive minstrel himself looks gaunt, and an unusual, shiny bump pokes out high on his forehead from beneath a receded hairline.

But the audience pays little heed to those factors as Steve flawlessly perse-

veres through his signature tune. The lyrics' fond, symbolic lament holds sway, and those packing the club eagerly give the anthemic "City of New Orleans" a ringing ovation, some rising from their seats as it bounces to a close.

"Yeah, yeah," Steve says amid cheers, whistles, shouts and sustained applause. "Thank you. Appreciate it. Thank you. Bless your hearts. Thank you for coming out here."

Years before, Steve didn't open his shows with "City of New Orleans." The song, one of the first he had written, routinely came partway through his set, often near the end, almost always with spoken thanks to Arlo Guthrie, whose spare, accordion-laced, gospel-tinged recording emblazoned it upon the public consciousness in 1972.

This night, however, its placement at the outset and with no introduction imbues the show with singularity. The tiny troubadour — wracked his entire adult life with a fatal disease but not going public about it until a relapse forced him to do so nearly two years ago, and on this night looking thinner than ever — seems to be up to something definitive, perhaps a career synopsis.

The reason for this perception lurks partly in an irony. Steve has written, recorded and performed with easily a hundred musicians far better known than he. He also has defined his persona, in part, by inviting onstage and jamming with many of those same vocalists and instrumentalists on tunes from the faded to the familiar to the fresh.

Yet on this evening, Steve is solo — the way so many believe he's at his best. He's collaborating not with other musicians, but with an adoring club audience that's the perfect size for his one-man band of styles and mastery of dynamics and pacing. And for this agreeable group of club patrons, some of whom learned the details of Steve's leukemia the previous fall by reading a first-person story in *People Weekly* or watching a profile of him on the NBC-TV magazine show "First Camera," it feels on this night as if he's embarking on encapsulation of his musical legacy.

But Steve throws 'em a curve. With his energy ratcheted up by the crowd's response to "City of New Orleans," his fingers begin to pick a slinky blues lick as he dives into a song that he wrote just seven weeks ago and that no one in the audience has heard before, "Hot Tub Refugee."

Wielding wacky rhymes and puns, the first-person tune exuberantly skewers the Hollywood hot-tubbing culture that Steve began to encounter four years prior when he moved his family from the Chicago suburb of Evanston to the Los Angeles suburb of Seal Beach. Steve sums up its theme for the audience:

"That's 'Tom Petty, eat your heart out,' right?"

The crowd cheers as Steve sings each slightly off-color reason for shunning the liquid pastime, such as, "My onions mean too much to me." They hoot as he introduces a guitar solo with "Soak it, now," and they chuckle as he pops his lips to imitate a Lawrence Welk bubble machine.

"The title for that came from Kansas City's own Maple Byrne," he says, injecting a genuinely local reference amid approving applause. Byrne, Steve's

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STEVE GOODMAN**

road manager, has worked with him since Steve Martin and Goodman teamed up for a series of continental concert tours by bus that began in 1978.

"I figured we'd do all the normal songs first, right?" Steve continues, with self-deprecating sarcasm. "Well, here's a song I made up with John Prine about nine months ago."

The allusion to Prine, the quirky and celebrated lyricist who has been Steve's closest musical collaborator since their early performing days in Chicago, draws respectful applause. Steve's use of the phrase "a song I made up" typically plays down the process and carefully crafted results of his own songwriting.

"We made this up after I had been overserved with tequila in a saloon," Steve says. Rapidly and rhythmically thumping the bass string of his guitar, he adds, "I heard this noise in my skull for three days."

A throwaway called "How Much Tequila Did I Drink Last Night?," the song strings together a succession of exaggerated predicaments resulting from an alcohol-induced blackout, including an inability to remember whose house he has awakened in and "the names of all the people sleeping in this bed."

The song plays well to the throng of beer drinkers, who laugh, holler and whoop throughout. But the heat of the evening and the upstairs sultriness have taken their toll. Ceiling fans notwithstanding, Steve continues to sweat. He moves on, however, segueing with the dependable excuse of mock musical laziness.

"I have one other in A minor, so I might as well do it," he says. "Put the capo on, so that I won't even recognize it."

He tunes the guitar briefly. "Pretty close, gee. Won't mess with that," he says, drawing laughs from those in the audience familiar with Steve's more usual, lengthy bouts with tuning. He introduces another newer song, known to only a few in the crowd, "about a fellow who falls asleep with his television set on," to the approval of three guys in the audience who shout, "Yeah!"

Like the "Tequila" song, "Vegematic" capitalizes on a litany — in this case, the intrinsically outrageous names of the cheap products advertised on late-night TV. Fueled by Steve's own bursts of mid-song laughter, the crowd cheers the satiric horror of the tune, in which the protagonist inadvertently orders all the items by phone while dreaming and discovers that "when I awoke, it was no joke, 'cause all that shit was here."

As an unintended extension, however, a hint of real-life horror emerges. While Steve's guitar playing is undeterred during the song, afterward he strums a minor chord over and over and mentions in self-taunting manner that his hands are not feeling right.

"Did'ja ever try to play 'Harlem Nocturne' on the kazoo?" he quips, referring to the minor chord. "That's what it felt like there. Where did the fingers go?"

The crowd laughs with him at the comment, apparently dismissing it as a leftover joke from the era of drugged-out hippie humor.

"Well," Steve persists, "those last two are on this little LP that we made. May

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STEVE GOODMAN

as well do a couple more from that one, and then we'll move on to some other stuff."

"What was the little LP?" a guy in the audience asks.

"The little LP? Well, they've got a couple of them over there. This is the one with me standing with all the porcelain statues in the Mexican parking lot," a reference to the cover photo on "Affordable Art," whose visual pun of a smiling Steve standing stiffly amid scores of inexpensive, inanimate sculptures is not lost on several in the crowd.

The tone ventures further into the morbid as Steve introduces "Watching Joey Glow."

"This is a song about a post-nuclear, nuclear family — mother, father, sister, brother and little Joey, the human hot plate," he says to peals of laughter. "Wrote this with a guy, he still works as one of the editors of the *National Lampoon*, and his name is Sean Kelly. He and I were sitting up one night. We were a little disgusted with how much hype the end of the world has been getting," a reference to two movies from the previous year about nuclear annihilation, "Testament" and "The Day After."

From the wings, Byrne, the road manager, tosses Steve a cloth to wipe sweat from his brow. Without missing a beat, Steve interprets the move with mordant wordplay.

"The road manager just threw in the towel. It's all over," he says.

"How about a fallout?" a guy in the audience shouts.

"Yeah, y'know, they have a film, a made-for-TV movie, a couple of books. 'Film at 11,' right? So here it is, a song about this little kid that they didn't get into the shelter on time."

Notwithstanding its grim focus, nearly every black-humor line of "Watching Joey Glow" — which describes how the irradiated boy turns bread into toast by touching it, heats up coffee with his toe and serves as a naturally illuminated Christmas tree — breaks up the audience.

"Yeah, appreciate it," Steve says to the end-of-song applause. Buying a few seconds, he piggybacks on a reference in the lyrics, absently picking on his guitar a quiet instrumental chorus to "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" while considering what to play next.

The decision is pivotal. He opts to pull out one of his most recent creations. It's a song that he debuted less than five months earlier, shortly after 4 a.m. on New Year's Day on Chicago's "Midnight Special" show on WFMT-FM. A song that soon he will position as the last cut on what will become his final album. A song that, despite its purported purpose as a tribute to someone else, turns out to be Steve's most fundamentally autobiographical composition.

"Well, tell you what," he says. "Here's a song about a 73-year-old guy at the time of his death. His name was Carl Martin, and he played in a string band, Martin, Bogan & Armstrong. They're, y'know, not the most notorious group in history, but Carl started playing with them in 1923, and he played with them until his death in 1979."

**The road manager just
threw in the towel.**

It's all over.

STEVE GOODMAN

He pauses, filling five seconds of silence with a couple of slight guitar licks, before dealing a punch line:

“So they had the arrangements pretty much together by the time —”

The crowd’s raucous laughter drowns him out in midsentence.

“I used to drive these guys to folk festivals in the East. We’d pick up the fiddler, Armstrong, in Detroit, where he lived, and we’d head for points unknown. And they used to try to keep me awake. They were sure their death was going to come at my hands behind the wheel.”

Steve quotes his favorite Howard Armstrong homily: “Steve, always remember, just like Socrates told Plato: When thine opus becomes thine onus, thou art out on thine anus.”

Again, peals of laughter ring from the crowd.

“Words to live by,” he follows up. “So, I really appreciated these guys.”

Lowering his usual stage voice, in a gentler, more intimate tone, Steve says in a half-whisper, “They played just *everything*.”

The half-spoken, half-sung masterpiece that follows is “You Better Get It While You Can (The Ballad of Carl Martin).” Its quiet lyrics and bouncy, infectious rhythm both belie and enhance the song’s dead-serious message: “From the cradle to the crypt, it’s a mighty short trip. ... If you wait too long, it’ll all be gone.” Its lesson rings clear: Live — and comprehend (“get”) — life to the fullest in the face of death, “while you can.”

The message may have originated from the life experience of ex-highway asphalter Carl Martin, as the song states. But for Steve, who will not end up living half as long as the mentor whom the song memorializes, the message has become his own. By performing the tune in his precarious state of health, Steve embodies a profound mixture of performer and content, literally living the message.

He ends the song with a five-bar guitar solo that abruptly halts on a splayed chord, like a minor car crash, but the song’s words have brought the audience to a hush, and somehow it all works.

“Thank you, folks,” he says to cheers and loud, reverent applause. “Thank you so much.”

On a roll, Steve sticks with the formula of fatality as he selects yet another just-written song that no one present has heard.

“Well, let’s see here,” he says. “All right, I got a dead-girl song. I never had one before.”

The comment breaks the serious mood and shakes more laughter from the audience.

“That’s a horseshit introduction,” Steve comes back. “This was going to be a serious song. I don’t know if I’m gonna be able to get through it now.”

But he does. The song, a pulsing ballad called “Fourteen Days,” tells the story of heartbroken, estranged lovers who ultimately remain so. It uses a device often used by Goodman, that of a woman who wrongs a man, and twists it. From out of town, the woman writes the man a letter asking his forgiveness but

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on thine anus.

HOWARD ARMSTRONG

threatening suicide if he doesn't meet her at the local airport in two weeks (the 14 days of the title). The man, out of spite, doesn't open and read the letter until, coincidentally, a few hours after the woman is to have arrived at the airport. He rushes to meet her, but she's gone, and the next day a newspaper reports that she has taken her life.

The song contains a blatant reference to Steve's imminent fate to which the audience is oblivious. The woman's letter is postmarked "Seattle, just 1,000 miles away," where Steve himself is slated to fly in less than three months for a bone-marrow transplant that offers his final chance for survival.

As the song proceeds, the crowd titters at what initially sounds like one melodramatic development after another. But with the passing of each verse, the gravity of the story unfolds, and during the song's final two lines, the laughter recedes completely. At the end, amid giggles and enthusiastic applause, Steve acknowledges the song's sneaky intention.

"You laugh now," he says, as if issuing a warning. "I bet someone that no one would be able to tell if that was a sad song or a funny song. I think I might win the bet."

"You win it," a guy shouts.

"It is on the edge, yeah," Steve says. "Well, I haven't had one of those in awhile, so every now and then you just gotta take a chance."

"What's the answer?" another guy shouts, confirming the song's edge, to which Steve can only snort.

By this time, following "City of New Orleans," Steve has played six consecutive newer songs, and the audience, antsy to hear something more familiar, starts calling out requests.

"I Don't Know Where I'm Goin'!" one guy shouts, indicating one of Steve's earliest songs, and certainly the one with the longest title: "The I Don't Know Where I'm Goin' but I'm Goin' Nowhere in a Hurry Blues."

"California Promises!" shouts another, referring to a more recent Goodman tune.

A third shouts the name of the early Bob Dylan classic, "Blowin' in the Wind."

"Yeah. Hey, Bob," Steve responds dryly, acknowledging the folk and rock legend who recorded two songs with him a dozen years prior. He tunes his guitar to the strains of one of his better-known mid-1970s songs, "Banana Republics," an intricate commentary on the fate of well-heeled but lonely Americans who can't find domestic happiness and opt to look for it south of the border.

"Well, I made up this song a few years back about Central America, and I hate like hell to see it come true," he tells the audience. "This was originally just for the square-grouper fishermen down there. That's what Jim Buffett called the runners."

While Steve talks, he tunes. Dissatisfied, he tunes some more. He breaks the repetitive strumming by telling a time-tested joke on himself:

**I bet someone that no one
would be able to tell
if that was a sad song
or a funny song.
STEVE GOODMAN**

**If you grew up in Chicago,
you knew everything
there was to know about
pain by the time you were
10 years old.
STEVE GOODMAN**

“It’s my delicate, birdlike technique that keeps the strings in tune.”

Guffaws rise and fall, as Steve further adjusts the pegs on the guitar neck, searching for the right blend. He pitches another favorite gag:

“What I do is get the one that’s the worst, and I tune the other five to it. Takes a little longer, but it’s worth it.”

More laughter ensues. Finally pleased with the tuning, Steve begins the familiar instrumental opening to “Banana Republics,” prompting cries of recognition. The song’s contemporary content, delicate melody, bittersweet chord changes and at times whispered presentation quickly transform the audience’s mood to somber. It’s no wonder, as the tune’s metaphorical hook, “Give me some words I can dance to, and a melody that rhymes,” perfectly undergirds its characters’ melancholy — not unlike the feelings that some in the audience may have tried to leave behind for the evening by coming to the show. The song draws both respectful and resounding applause.

In a shrewd move of nonverbal pacing, Steve pops onto his head a bright blue Chicago Cubs hat, with the red letter “C” on the crown, drawing cheers from those who remember the deep love he’s long held for his native North Side big-league baseball team.

“These guys are trying to make me look bad,” he says in sardonic reference to the Cubbies, launching into an update on the team’s status in the then-East Division of the National League. “They’re in first place by a game. They’ve managed to lose a couple of pitchers in the last week, though, so they might change. They lost (Scott) Sanderson and (Dick) Ruthven, and they’re hot for awhile, and no one knows when they’ll be back. Went out for a beer.”

The mocking comments about the team’s meteoric, early-season success point directly to the song Steve is about to introduce, “A Dying Cub Fan’s Last Request,” his instantly consummate 1981 valentine to the seemingly cursed Cubs, who, in their “ivy-covered burial ground” of Wrigley Field have served as “the doormat of the National League” for most of the previous four decades.

“If you grew up in Chicago, you knew everything there was to know about pain by the time you were 10 years old,” he tells the doubled-over audience as he tunes again. “That’s why there aren’t so many psychiatrists in Chicago, because we have the Cubs. If you can learn to forgive your parents and the Cubs, you can save yourself \$25,000. They’re liable to screw it up and win it, just to fix it so I can’t sing this song.”

As earlier in describing Martin, Bogan & Armstrong, his voice shifts to a quieter, slightly lower register for another moment of intimacy.

“I’d be there to cheer for ’em,” he coos while softly strumming and picking the song’s rhythm pattern. “I admit I like baseball as much as I like music, and that’s a hell of an admission.”

But he bounces back, louder, with a local wisecrack.

“And I sure am happy to let you have Willie Wilson back,” he says, eliciting a round of cheers and groans.

Five days earlier, Wilson, the Kansas City Royals’ star outfielder, resumed

active status after he and two other players served nearly three months at the federal penitentiary at Fort Worth, Texas. The three pleaded guilty in federal court the previous November for attempted possession of cocaine — the so-called 1980s “drug of choice” — and were suspended by the baseball commissioner’s office for a full year. But in April, an arbitrator ruled that Wilson could return to action in mid-May.

Steve sarcastically likens Wilson’s preferential treatment to that of the 59-year-old former sports-car maker John DeLorean, who, using an entrapment defense, soon is to be acquitted on federal drug charges even though police videotaped him in 1982 closing a cocaine deal worth \$24 million.

“What a crock of shit that is, ain’t it?” Steve says. “I don’t want to preach, but you know John DeLorean’s gonna walk, don’t you? What a lotta shit. He had a big suitcase full of it. He’s gonna walk. He won’t do day one, guaranteed. You can go to the bank on that.

“Wilson tried to find some. Three months,” he says pointedly, to the audience’s wild laughter. “Yeah-h-h.”

Steve performs his six-minute Cubs epic, which depicts, in unquestionably autobiographical spirit, the title character planning his funeral at Wrigley. The scenario brims with details, including umpires who “bark me out at every base” and a bonfire of baseball bats at home plate into which his coffin is thrown so that his ashes “blow in a beautiful snow” over the left-field wall to nearby Waveland Avenue.

Ever the editor of his own work, Steve skips over a couple of lines from the original third verse that revive Hall-of-Famer Ernie Banks’ fabled phrase “Let’s play two” and that beg departed broadcaster Jack Brickhouse to conduct a final interview. He also updates the song by throwing in a reference to the Cubs’ recently hired broadcaster, Harry Caray. By the end of the mostly talking blues, he has the crowd whooping and whistling.

In a role reversal after the song ends, a guy in the audience yells to Steve, “Thank you!”

“Yeah, any old time,” Steve replies. “So, how we doing?” he asks while peering at a clock on the wall and tuning again. “Oh, we got plenty of time.”

A slurred voice in the crowd shouts, “Elvis Presley!” Many in the audience don’t realize it, but the shout constitutes a request for Steve’s “Elvis Imitators,” which Jimmy Buffett, calling himself Freddie and the Fishsticks, recorded in 1981 and which Goodman performed with showy aplomb in 1982 on PBS-TV’s “Austin City Limits” fund-raising special, “Down Home Country Music.”

“You want that? My kids like that one,” Steve says, referring to his grade-school daughters Jessie, Sarah and Rosanna. He mimics his girls’ 8 o’clock Sunday morning whine: “Pop, do the one about the Elvis imitator! C’mon, dad!”

“If Elvis imitators could ever get a union, this could be their song,” he adds, drawing laughs as he strikes an Elvis pose and asks the soundboard operator to turn up the “slap,” or echo, from the speakers.

With a reasonable facsimile of Presley’s voice, Steve launches into the affec-

**Pop, do the one about the
Elvis imitator! C’mon, dad!**

STEVE GOODMAN

quoting his daughters

tionate rockabilly parody of Elvis impersonators from their own point of view. His presentation comes complete with pouty facial mannerisms, a laundry list of Presley song and movie titles and a chorus that drives home the message: “Imitation Elvis may not be The King, but baby, I’m the next best thing.”

The surreal tour de force, packed into a performance not even two minutes long, draws hearty, sustained applause from the audience. Mopping his brow, Steve again imitates his daughters: “C’mon, dad!”

“Well,” he says, applying another layer of self-effacing sarcasm, “while we’re doing all the sensitive stuff —”

But as a beer bottle clinks on the floor, the hyped-up horde again pelts Steve with song titles.

“Sin to Tell a Lie!” shouts one man.

“Talk Backwards,” yells a woman.

“I’m My Own Grandpa,” offers another guy.

Opting for “Talk Backwards,” Steve sends his fingers racing over the guitar frets as he propels himself faster than usual through his 1980 collaboration with Michael Smith (best known for writing “The Dutchman,” which Steve recorded memorably a dozen years before). In “Talk Backwards,” Steve assumes the role of mock huckster, promoting a fictional “new sensation” of pronouncing words and phrases as if their letters appear in reversed order. The audience marvels and whistles at his pell-mell enunciation of the tune’s inverted sentences and phrases (“I love you” becomes “You, oh evil eye”).

As the two-minute novelty song ends and the applause and hollers die down, Steve holds up a magazine to introduce another just-written tune that no one in the audience has heard, “Queen of the Road.”

“This is *Easy Rider*. It’s sort of a cross between *Hustler* and *Road & Track*. And I know there aren’t enough songs about biker chicks,” he says, to whoops and belly laughs. “So I wrote this song about this young lady — this old lady, old Oyl — and her bro’, right?”

Adding to the intrigue, he throws out another hook:

“I’m not Pete Seeger, y’know,” he says, referring to the folk-music legend with whom he has recorded and shared the stage dozens of times, and to Seeger’s enthusiastic ability to lead sing-alongs. “This has a little part for you in it, but you’re going to have to figure it out.”

The crowd roars its approval as Steve pounds his bass string with a speedy, double-timed, rock ‘n’ roll beat. To the audience’s delight, he also buzzes his lips to approximate the thunderous revving of a motorcycle “hog” and launches into the song, a sympathetic character study of a woman with a “roadhouse reputation” whom “nothing can stop.” The song’s opportunity for audience participation comes in the chorus, in a repeated, syncopated ditty: “Putt-putt.” The crowd joins in readily and clamors for more of the same rowdy material when the tune ends.

Pacing is on Steve’s mind again, however. Nearly an hour has passed since he stepped onstage. Pausing a few seconds, slowing his breathing and searching his

I know there aren’t enough
songs about biker chicks.

STEVE GOODMAN

memory, he summons a request shouted half an hour earlier for a composition inspired by the coastal L.A. suburb he's called home for the past four years.

"This is a song for a couple who meet by the Seal Beach Pier in Seal Beach, California, right before the wind comes and destroys the pier. She says, 'I'll be right back.'"

In the quiet, sad little tune, "California Promises," the woman never does return. On this night, it produces pin-drop silence, then, at the end, booming applause.

"Appreciate you letting me sing that," Steve says.

After an instant of calm, the requests tumble forth, overlapping each other.

"Learn to Dance!" a man shouts, a reference to one of Steve's first songs, which Jackie DeShannon recorded in 1972, the touching "Would You Like to Learn to Dance?"

"Video Tape," yells another.

"Oh yeah, so —" Steve begins, but the requests keep pouring in.

"Do You Want to Learn to Dance!"

"Blue Umbrella!"

"The Oldest Baby!"

"Oldest Baby?" Steve responds. "That's John Prine's."

"This Old Hotel!" another guy calls out, intending Goodman's "This Hotel Room."

Steve rolls his eyes for a moment.

"I missed a few of 'em, huh?" he says.

"Yeah," says a guy in the front row.

"I tried to sing a couple of the new ones tonight. I hope I didn't screw up."

"No, not at all," the guy says.

"I'll get the other ones next time," he says, injecting an extra inflection of sarcasm. "I obviously didn't know the new ones real well. Have to learn 'em sometime."

"They're great," the guy says.

"Didn't mean to do it at your expense," Steve says. In another glancing reference to the fatigue lurking beneath his enthusiasm, he adds, "I've been looking for my left hand for an hour now. So, anyhow, oh, I know what I wanted to sing. This is an a cappella song —"

Several in the crowd whoop at the prospect of Steve performing the only composition that he has written and recorded for unaccompanied voice, "The Ballad of Penny Evans," a strident anti-war song from 1972 that is told from the viewpoint of the 21-year-old widow of a Vietnam War soldier. The power of the song derives not just from its lyrics, but also from its presentation without instrumentation, and by a male voice, no less.

But that isn't the song Steve has started to introduce.

"OK, I guess we'll do two a cappella songs," he says, to clue in the audience that eventually he will sing "Penny Evans."

He resumes his introduction of another voice-only song, a biting sendup

**I tried to sing a couple of
the new ones tonight.**

I hope I didn't screw up.

STEVE GOODMAN

that borrows the format of the traditional Scottish “Oh, come all ye” ballads. No one in the room has heard it before. Few anywhere have ever heard it.

“I woke up in Ottawa, Ontario, a couple of years ago after playing a club there that’s about half the size of this and twice as warm temperature-wise, and full of a certain kind of smoke and haze, and then I went upstairs. Y’know, it was a good gig, but it was draining somehow, right? So I drained a bottle of brandy about that far (halfway) down, right? And I woke up in this place the next morning. I should have known better when it said, ‘The room comes with the gig,’ right?”

“I was in the motel where the bar was, and the place had been furnished in 1947 and had a lot of Formica all over it and a TV from not long after that, which I had left on where I had passed out.

“And in French and English was the cable news for Ontario, and in French and English the first story I saw was the sad tale of a William Kemp of Sudbury, Ontario, a mining town, filthy town. William Kemp, 61 years old, had fallen asleep in a dumpster behind a bar, and the coroner’s verdict was death by compacting. That was the first thing I saw, and my head’s like, ‘Ohhh shit!’ So here’s the song.”

Steve picks a note on his guitar, hums briefly to match its pitch and, in a sonorous, almost nasal brogue, sings his “Ballad of William Kemp.” In three verses, he details the demise of the foul-smelling drunkard, building the audience up for a wicked, culminating punch line: “Mark well the saga of William Kemp, a hopeless Sudbury rube / who began his life as a perfect square and ended as a cube.”

Whether the name William Kemp is that of a real person or a clever reference to the founder of English morris dancing, the precursor of American square dancing (and thus “a perfect square”), is a question lost on the audience.

But the listeners recognize the song’s dark humor, in which all death — even that of a hapless vagrant — becomes the ultimate joke. With each progression of Kemp’s story, they cheer, and when Steve irresistibly approaches the closing geometric wordplay, they anticipate it with howls and laughs, followed by boisterous applause.

Amid the hubbub, a bartender, taking note of the late-evening mugginess and Steve’s feverish appearance, flips the switch for one of the huge wall fans.

“We turned on the air, Steve,” he shouts.

“Oh, good, now I’ll catch pneumonia,” Steve shoots back. “Good. Great. Don’t leave it on too long. I’m a little damp up here, OK?”

A guy in the crowd yells out one of his previous requests:

“I Don’t Know Where I’m Goin’!”

“Yeah,” Steve says, a laugh under his breath. “Join the club.”

The retort — saturated with double meaning — breaks up the crowd.

“I know what bus I’m taking,” Steve says. With a nod to 19th-century songwriter Stephen Foster, whose short life span paralleled Steve’s, he adds, “Doo-dah, doo-dah.”

Oh, good, now I’ll
catch pneumonia.
STEVE GOODMAN

He introduces, as promised, “The Ballad of Penny Evans,” once again downplaying the deftness of his songwriting:

“Here’s a song that was recited to me without the rhyme by a young woman in Rochester, New York, in 1972, and all I did was make the last line of whatever she said rhyme with the next line. That’s all I did.”

The audience, of course, knows better, and just two lines into the unaccompanied, bitterly emotional plaint, once again Steve’s presentation brings the crowd to an awed silence that endures through its remainder. After its pointed final line, “They say the war is over, but I think it’s just begun,” the Reagan-era crowd erupts in unison with 15 seconds of nonstop applause.

Under the din, however, the torrent of forced air from the wall fan shakes Steve. He seeks to catch the bartender’s eye.

“I’m starting to melt up here. Can you keep it off me?” he asks.

Again, after the applause dies down, he addresses the bartender.

“It’s blowing right on me. Is it OK if we turn it off for just a minute? It’s blowing right on me. Can’t even —”

Finally, Steve pulls off his drenched shirt, stripping to a T-shirt, accompanied by hoots from the crowd.

“Snappy, huh?” he says.

“Go, Steve!” a guy in the audience yells.

“Yeah, really,” Steve replies. “Take it all off.”

Another man in the audience prompts a scant exchange of intimacy.

“We love you!” he shouts.

“Love you guys,” Steve answers.

He pauses for the split second wherein the emotion hangs, then moves forward in ingratiating fashion.

“Well, I promised someone this song. It actually made it to the flip side of a Rodney Crowell single. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band recorded a song by Rodney, called ‘It’s a Long Hard Road,’ good song. If you buy it, you get the Dirt Band’s version of this song.”

The B-side song, from 1977, is “Video Tape,” possibly Steve’s best-crafted composition, which displays all of Goodman’s quintessential songwriting talents. With its sturdy and efficient tripod of verses, the song comically yet matter-of-factly explores the fantasies of changing the past and predicting the future, including the ability to dodge the “grim reaper.” It finally settles upon a romantic embrace of life’s realities: “I know it will all make sense, if you love me in the present tense.”

After singing the sobering song, Steve keeps strumming with the same rhythm and in the same key. To transform the mood once again, he turns to well-honed shtick to introduce his staple of a closer.

“Well, does anybody have a cowboy hat, so I can sing this song here?” he asks, assuring the uninitiated, “I’ll give it right back, I promise.”

One man passes his hat forward to Steve. Another takes a hat off the head of a friend. Someone shouts, “Give him the hat!” The second hat comes forward.

Does anybody have a cowboy hat, so I can sing this song here? I’ll give it right back, I promise.

STEVE GOODMAN

**Well, the operation was
a big success.
STEVE GOODMAN**

“I’ll give it right back, I promise,” Steve repeats.

He holds up and looks over the two hats.

“Hey, man,” a guy in the front row says. “We’ll A/B ’em. We could A/B ’em, if you like,” a reference to the audience ranking them as A and B.

Steve nods and says, “We’ll size up the situation.”

He places on his head the larger and more elaborate of the two hats, to wild cheers from the audience. Though he can barely see out from beneath it, he declares it the winner.

“No fucking contest!” he says.

He passes the other hat back and, for a moment, strikes a play-acting cowboy’s pose.

“You see a one-armed man count his change?” he asks, waiting for the delayed reaction to the quip.

“No? Well, anyhow, this song here, John Prine and I made up one night, and we tried to put into one song anything that had ever been in any of the country songs we’d ever heard.”

The audience cheers and whoops in anticipation of the country parody “You Never Even Call Me by My Name,” written in 1971 and made a country hit by David Allan Coe in 1975.

Before starting the song, however, Steve signals that it is indeed his closer.

“This hat is perfect. And so are you guys. And thank you very much, OK, for coming out tonight. And thanks to Beth for playing so good.”

Bursts of “Thank you!” come back at Steve from the crowd. One guy shouts, “Welcome to K.C.!”

“Nice to be here,” Steve answers. With no hint of irony, he adds, “I hope it ain’t two years again.” He pauses, to more cheers, and says dryly, “I’ll come back when I know my new songs, I promise.”

He widens his stance and tilts forward, explaining, “Country bands always lean into the mike at a 45-degree angle.” The crowd roars as Steve adds a geometric point: “This is hipper for people in the wings.”

As he plays the opening bars, cries of “Yee-hah!” come from the crowd. The song lampoons every aspect of country-western music, from its simple, three-chord structure and mournful lyrics to the harmonica, fiddle and pedal steel that are the targets for Steve’s incisive vocal and physical mimicry.

Throughout the song, the borrowed, oversized hat keeps falling over Steve’s brow. “It’s a good thing I have ears,” he jokes between verses.

Near the end, he throws in other asides. At the song’s reference to his savior calling him home, Steve calls out, “Bring in those sheaves!” Preacher-like, he shouts, “Heal!” Summoning a medical metaphor for the tune so far (which doubles as an in-joke for the last-ditch treatment he faces in three months), he says, “Well, the operation was a big success.” Many howl at each line.

The song’s capper comes when Steve tells the listeners he’s about to throw together in the final verse a ridiculously long list of prototypically country elements: prison, farms, Mother, trains, trucks, Christmas, dead dogs and getting

drunk. On this night, though, perhaps inspired by the crowd and a devil-may-care sense of challenge, he adds two more items: bullwhips and CB radios.

"I appear to have dug myself a hole," he says, before pressing on with the last four lines, in which he tells how a farm dog gets drunk and dies while Mother bullwhips a guard, breaks out of prison on Christmas and drives a CB-equipped truck into a train.

The outrageous logic and Steve's lyrical dexterity bring the crowd to its feet, as he broadly tips the cowboy hat, passes it back to the audience and leaves the stage. The throng cheers, chants and stomps for an encore, and Steve returns, soaked and visibly exhausted, yet wearing the huge Goodman grin.

"It's a big treat for me," he says, "taking in O₂ and lettin' out CO₂."

The crowd clamors for more.

"Now, here's a song —" he says, but the shouted requests nearly drown him out.

"Door Number Three!" one guy yells.

"Yeah, 'Door Number Three!'" another calls out.

"Here's a song," Steve begins again, "called 'The One—'"

"Yeah, do 'The One That Got Away!'" a man shouts.

"Good guess," Steve answers.

He starts strumming the tune's opening chords, when yet another guy shouts a phrase that is both a lyric and an admonition:

"Stay all night! Play a little longer!"

From his mental songbook, Steve responds instantly and instrumentally, noodling on his guitar to the chorus of the shouted phrase from an old Bob Wills swing song. He shifts to tuning again. After a few seconds, a guy in the front row nods his assent that the strings are in sync.

"Finally, huh?" Steve says.

"Just in time," the man says.

"Don't screw it up and tune, right?" Steve says.

Moving on to introduce the song, he pays tribute to a smooth-voiced pop crooner who died two decades prior.

"I just wish Sam Cooke was alive, so that he could sing this," Steve says. "I was born too late to get this one to him."

It's an irresistible entrée for a fan in the audience, who triggers an exchange that sums up both the evening and Steve himself.

"We're glad you're alive," the guy calls out.

"Me, too," Steve answers, to cheers. "Glad you're alive. Spread it around. Might as well have some fun while we're here, right?"

In prescient fashion, "The One That Got Away," which Steve released in 1979 with a harmony vocal by Nicolette Larson, is the perfect follow-up. The tender story — of a pair of men and a pair of women reveling in their past, would-be romantic glories — leads seamlessly to the song's advice, which is to not "run around saying 'I love you' with your fingers crossed."

When Steve reaches the next line of the song, "It's too late to go back now /

**I just wish Sam Cooke
was alive, so that
he could sing this.
STEVE GOODMAN**

That's just about as good as it gets," he laughs to himself, letting slip another reference to the transplant looming for him in Seattle.

The song draws rapt attention throughout and warm applause at the end, after which Steve puts down his guitar and picks up a larger, rounded, stringed relative called a mandola.

"I forgot to play this," he says as he starts tuning it. But he notices a pool of his sweat beneath his feet.

"Well, good," he says, returning to sarcasm. "Let's step in the puddle, then touch the microphone. All right."

Strumming a hypnotic riff on the mandola, Steve once more introduces a song that no one in the room has heard. This time, though, it's an instrumental, and as Steve plays it, he explains its offbeat background.

"Someone actually told me this joke right before I made this melody up, so I'll pass it on to you. The title of this song is 'Your Monkey's Ball's in My Beer.' See, there was this organ grinder standing out in front of a bar in New Orleans, where they have huge, hurricane glasses, about as big as my arm. A fellow walked out with one full of beer. The monkey leaped off the organ and sat on the edge of the beer glass. The guy looked at the organ grinder and said, 'Hey, your monkey's ball's in my beer.' The organ grinder played this."

The attempted joke elicits a few titters, but its point remains elusive. So Steve quickly segues to a second instrumental, "If Jethro Were Here," a tune that Steve released the previous year and named for his elder, frequent partner over the previous decade, Jethro Burns, the mandolinist of Homer & Jethro fame.

"OK, now, this song here is dedicated to Jethro Burns, one of the finest musicians of this century, who deserves a better intro than the one I gave him. And if he was here, he'd show us all how to play these things.

"Which is what my road manager did. He told me that this (the mandola) was the bottom four strings of the guitar backwards. So if you have dyslexia and you can play the guitar, there's no secret to this thing," he says, siphoning more laughs from the audience.

The fast-paced instrumental barrels along with periodic bursts of syncopation that draw whoops from the crowd and a loud ovation at the end.

"Thank you," Steve says. "Here's our swan song. This is a song I learned off a Burl Ives record when I was a kid."

"Who?" asks a guy in the front row.

"Burl Ives. Remember him?"

"Oh yeah!" several say. "Yeah."

Steve catches a signal from the wings and says, "I've been told to announce that I'm going to change my shirt and then come back over there, and if you bought one of our discs, I'll be glad to sign it for you."

"We'll buy two!" a man shouts.

"Sounds like some of you have 'em already, for which I'm eternally grateful, OK?" he says. "This is one of the few towns where they actually ended up in the

**This song here is dedicated
to Jethro Burns, one of the
finest musicians
of this century.
STEVE GOODMAN**

stores, OK? It's amazing. I owe that to Maple Byrne and your local merchants."

He strums the mandola a few more times.

"OK, this song that I learned off the Burl Ives record has some verses that Burl didn't sing."

Some in the crowd guffaw.

"Seriously," he says, "I found them in a fake book, y'know, one of those things with a thousand songs, and it was then that I learned that this is an old hobo song, written by some of those pinko hobos — all right, pink and purple, right? So here's the song, and thanks again."

It has been an evening during which Goodman, while enduring obvious illness, has shared some of his finest songs and risked showcasing an equal number of newer, mostly unheard efforts. More than half the night's selections have centered — poignantly, uproariously or both — on living in the face of doom and demise.

So his choice of a traditional standard sung and adapted by many others, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," seems an inspired ending for a nonstop, 90-minute performance by a little guy who routinely has championed the talents of his musical peers and scoffed at claims of his own.

Perhaps the song — with its indulgent vision of endless food and drink, and idle pleasures — points to a world that the weary Steve longs for:

*I'm headed for the land that's far away
Beside the crystal fountain
Where I'll see you all this coming fall
In the big rock candy mountain*

Picturing a world where "they hung the jerk who invented work," the lyrics hint at fantasies harbored by the "freight yards full of old black men" that Steve summoned in "City of New Orleans":

*Oh, the buzzin' of the bees in the cigarette trees
By the sody-water fountain
Where the lemonade springs and the bluebird sings
In the big rock candy mountain*

The song proves satisfying to many of the concert-goers, who briefly turn their thoughts away from mortality and focus instead on the tune's affectionate humor, along with Steve's easygoing rhythm and hushed vocal.

At the end, Steve tacks on an instrumental reprise of the chorus, landing upon a gentle chord.

"Well, thank you," he says to reverberating applause. "I hope to get to play for you again some night." 🎵

**This is an old hobo song,
written by some of those
pinko hobos.**

STEVE GOODMAN