

‘Steve provided everybody with a comfort zone’

[In honor of Studs Terkel, who died Oct. 31, 2008, at age 96, here is an edited transcript of an interview I conducted with Studs on Nov. 22, 1999, in Chicago.]

Let’s start by describing Steve Goodman.

He was a natural, in that what you saw is what he was. There was no dissemblance. Steve was a generous-hearted kid, as simple as that, who happened to be generously gifted. And not only was he generously gifted, it’s the generous heart of him that he put forth others as much as he put forth himself.

When Kris Kristofferson came to town, he was established, and he liked Steve very much. Steve was saying, “But there’s a guy named John Prine,” and he talked more about John Prine than he did about himself. But, of course, Kris liked both, naturally. I can think of the same thing with another singer, Paul Anka. But Steve was always putting forth others, especially John Prine, who, of course, was and is immensely gifted. As a songwriter, John is one of the most brilliant of songwriters. John Prine has the quality of Ring Lardner and Lardner’s ironic tales.



Studs Terkel, shown in 2002. (Photo by Stephen Anzaldi of Northwestern University)

Steve, the capacious heart, was also big, so the thing becomes an anthem. “City of New Orleans” becomes an anthem because Steve thought in anthem terms. An anthem is something larger than a single person. It’s big and expansive, and so when Arlo Guthrie sings it, for example, Arlo, of course, comes from that great legacy, Woody’s legacy. Woody, by the way, would have liked Steve very much. I knew Woody quite well, and he would have liked Steve because he would have recognized in Steve this kid who is immensely talented but at the same time generous-hearted.

See, Steve and Woody had a similar — John Prine, too, for that matter — they can write songs with such ease, it seems. Woody would always say that, “Anybody can write,” because it came so easily to him. Woody did this in the New Deal days, when he worked for the Columbia Valley Authority up in Washington. There must have been 20 songs in 20 days. They just flowed out. They had a quality that Steve had. Two others had that quality. One was Mozart, in a totally different way. The songs would come out whole. Whole. And the other was Fats Waller. I use this incongruous combination because they all had that similar quality. And Steve, of course, had that great humor, the humor of the song.

I saw him at the Earl of Old Town, of course. There he stood, this little guy, this bantam weight. Short, but bigness of voice and heart. And immediately, as soon as he started, you knew it was contagious, of course. The audience was simply caught up with that ebullience. Even though Steve knew what he had. He knew his time was limited. He knew that.

Did you talk with him about that?

No, I didn’t know him that well. But nonetheless, he knew it, and despite that, y’see, it was such gracefulness. It’s a hell of a phrase to use, but in that vein.

And so he put forth people, he had his own songs, and it was so natural. Again, I come back to the fact. No pretense. That’s it, y’know. There’s a phrase that goes, “He is what he seems to be.” He was not an actor. He was not someone putting on an act. He was there. That was it. And everyone took to him, of course, all of the colleagues from elsewhere, too.

He also was particularly Chicago.

He came out of Chicago, a Chicago product, one of those kids. He had these great Chicago songs, the “Lincoln Park Pirates,” the take-off on the crooks, but he would do it so humorously. And the song about his old man, of course. Very moving. His father was a car salesman here.

“Lincoln Park Pirates” is just funny, and it’s a true take-off. Mike Royko liked Stevie Goodman very much because he knew that Steve knew Chicago. Of course, Royko would like Steve because he knew the city and knew the hotshots and the phonies and did it with a great deal of humor.

You ever had a car towed by Lincoln Towing?

I never drove a car in my life. No, I never drove a car.

“Daley’s Gone.”

Oh yeah, one more round.

“Paul Powell.”

Paul Powell was a crooked politician, in the south “Paw Paa.” And he had a shoebox full of lots of money. Royko did great columns on him. I forgot Stevie did a song about him. See, they intertwined, Mike and Steve did.

I remember so well your saying at the tribute two years ago, “Whenever I hear that song ‘My Kind of Town, Chicago Is,’ I hear the voice of Frank Sinatra. What the hell does he know about Chicago?”

I’m glad you remembered that. That’s true. “My Kind of Town, Chicago Is,” that’s Steve. Don’t tell me Sinatra, for Christ’s sake. He’s more Las Vegas, more like Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Las Vegas. Don’t give me Chicago, for Christ’s sake. That burns my ass when I hear that. “My Kind of Town, Chicago Is” is Steve.

You had Steve on your radio show many times. Why did you want him as a guest?

For selfish reasons. It makes for a wonderful hour. He was a creative person whom I respected, and that’s enough. We would talk about songs, just natural things, how he would come to write songs and the natural aspects of Chicago. Nothing special.

You two seemed to have great rapport.

I felt comfort, is the word. Steve provided everybody with a comfort zone. He was a one-man comfort zone, and when you were with him, you felt comfortable. He was just there, and there wasn’t any nastiness or anything. He’d never put down anybody, even colleagues who were highly successful. I think he got a kick out of everybody.

I don’t mean to make this a Boy Scout story, but he just was one of these guys who was pretty sure of himself. I don’t think he had that insecurity of being short and all of that stuff. It didn’t matter. I think he just didn’t have those worries because he felt secure in himself. How old was he when he died?

Thirty-six.

See, there’s the harshness, stupidity of life and fate. It makes no sense. At the same time, in those 36 years, we remember him as though he had lived 80, y’see. We’re speaking of a certain kind of maturity that he had, and I think his songs will hang around quite awhile.

Did you hang out at the folk clubs?

Not much. I was writing, doing the radio show. I would go in there with my friend, Win Stracke, of course. Win was a great one. The thing about Steve that’s so good, also, was that Steve respected those who came before him. He respected Win Stracke very much. Others seemed to forget Win. It was Win who founded the Old Town School of Folk Music, no matter what people think. But Steve always remembered. I remember one time he was telling me and protecting credit. I forget who it was, but he was a little hurt by someone, not for himself but for Win, and he thought Win was too much taken for granted by the others.

Win was great. He’s in a couple of books, the World War II book, “The Good War” tells about that, and he’s in “Hard Times.” One tells about early work, the unions and being blacklisted and World War II experiences in Germany, very interesting. Steve was just a young singer in town. Win was the Bard of Chicago, and Steve respected Win very much. That’s my point. He respected his predecessors. Just in his behavior.

We were part of a scene way back in the 1950s. Win Stracke and I knew the Almanac Singers in the late 1930s, 1940s. When World War II was breaking out, they were going around. Woody and Lee Hays and Pete Seeger and Millard Lampell, the predecessors of the Weavers, only Woody was a member then, they would sing for unions then, and Win was doing a lot of that. In the meantime, the folk-song revival began in the early 1950s, and Win and I, Big Bill Broonzy, we did stuff at different colleges, a program called “I Come for to Sing,” introducing the songs of Elizabethan, folk, frontier and black-man blues, similar things, and I was the emcee. Steve was still a kid when that was going on. We were around quite awhile.

I think Steve respected tradition. That’s the thing. I think it’s in all his songs, in a way. But he also came at a certain moment of the 1960s, and he was just right to fit the 1960s, Steve and that geniality and the ebullience and that optimistic note. There was something upbeat, upbeat about him without being phony Pollyanna. There was a hopeful note. Here’s a young kid who was dying, yet somehow you think of hope. That’s the irony, and that’s the poetry of Stevie Goodman.

How Studs’ preface came to be

In mid-December 2006, just a few months before my Steve Goodman biography went to the printer, my publisher, ECW Press, asked me to find a Chicago source or two who could read part or all of my manuscript and write a blurb that would appear on the book’s back cover. My first choice, of course, was Studs Terkel.

I called Studs’ phone number on the afternoon of Dec. 19, and a young man answered.

“Is Studs home?” I asked.

“Yeah, but he’s taking a nap,” said the man, whom I soon learned was Studs’ caretaker, J.R.

“Oh. Well, when would be a good time to call back?”

“You can just e-mail him,” J.R. said.

“E-mail? The guy’s 94, and he does e-mail?”

“Sure,” J.R. said. “Just e-mail him.”

“OK.”

So that evening I sent him a brief message with my blurb request. At 9:06 the next morning (Studs’ time) came his reply.

“Good Day Clay,” it read. “Here it goes.”

What followed were three sterling paragraphs — not a blurb about my manuscript, of course, because he hadn’t seen it, but rather a capsule summary of Steve Goodman. For 20 minutes, I puzzled over how to tell a 94-year-old legend that what he wrote was magnificent, but it wasn’t what I’d asked for. Then it dawned on me, “You dummy, he’s just written your preface.”

I e-mailed back, asking if I could use his mini-essay as my book’s preface. He instantly assented. Then, undaunted, I wrote back, asking again about whether he could read part of my manuscript and blurb it. His reply, at 9:39 a.m., was classic:

“I’m finishing a deadline on my memoir. I am the deadline. I hope I can finish it before I kick off — so no other project can I do ‘till March.”

It didn’t take long for me to realize that having Studs provide the preface was more of an honor than any blurb could be. I remain stunned by his generosity and humanity.

And yes, he did meet his deadline. He finished his memoir, “Touch and Go,” plus another book, “P.S. Further Thoughts From a Lifetime of Listening,” before he kicked off. Thank you, Studs.

— Clay Eals