

Remembering a Good Man: Steve Goodman 30 Years Later

By Rand Smith

Q. What Lake Forest alum is buried in an unmarked grave where, all summer long, men trod on his remains while thousands cheer?

A. Steve Goodman '70 (1948–1984), musician and fervent Cub fan, whose ashes are buried beneath home plate in Wrigley Field.

That's just one unusual fact about Goodman's brief but eventful life. Even more exceptional was his prolific musical career. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, until his untimely death at age 36, Steve developed a loyal fan following, recorded nine albums, and wrote several well-known songs, including the now-classic "City of New Orleans." Today he is fondly remembered by thousands of fans for his humor, his expressive baritone voice, and his masterful guitar playing.

Steve's return to the area probably had more to do with music than a liberal arts education, for he quickly became a fixture in the thriving Chicago folk-music scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The center of that scene was the Earl of Old Town, located on Wells Street. Owned by Earl Pionke, one of Steve's earliest supporters, "the Earl" featured such prominent Chicago folksingers as Fred and Ed Holstein, Bonnie Koloc, Bob Gibson, and John Prine. For a year and a half, Steve juggled his Lake Forest classes with performances at the Earl and other local clubs. A *Chicago Tribune* "On the Town" column from that period remarked: "We can't help wondering how Steve Goodman is doing in his studies at Lake Forest College. He was singing folk songs at the Earl of Old Town until 4 a.m., then making an 8:30 class in world history at the campus about 30 miles from Wells Street."

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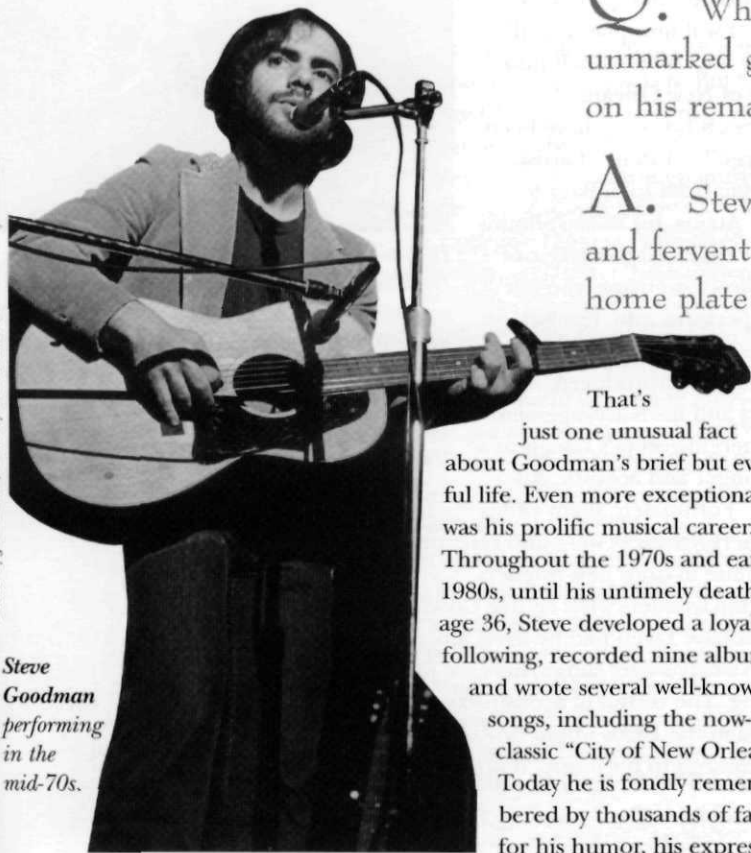
Steve was first and foremost a Chicagoan. Raised in the Albany Park neighborhood on the city's North Side and in suburban Niles, he developed a close identification with the city that was reflected in many of his songs, including two popular odes to his beloved Cubs ("Go Cubs Go" and "A Dying Cub Fan's Last Request"). Music was early in his veins. While a student at Maine Township East High School, Steve began writing and performing folk songs. He later attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for two years before returning to the Chicago area and enrolling at Lake Forest in the fall of 1967.

Steve performed respectably in his coursework and even participated in the Garrick Players. He later admitted, however, that "In college I was studying history, but I wasn't enjoying it half so much as playing guitar." His heart lay with music, and in early 1969 he withdrew from the College to follow his muse. Also about this time he was diagnosed with leukemia, an illness he fought for the rest of his life. It is unclear whether his withdrawal from Lake Forest was also linked to his illness, but his emergence as a singer-songwriter began soon after leaving the College.

During the next three years, Steve honed his performing skills in Chicago area venues, even as he

Photo by John Drew, courtesy of Northwestern University Archives

Steve Goodman performing in the mid-70s.



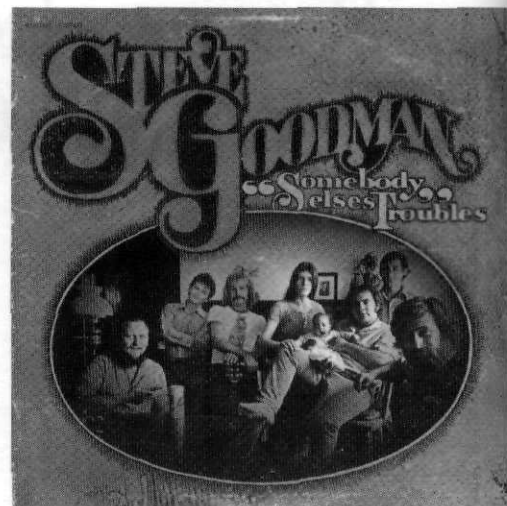
began a family of three daughters with his wife, Nancy. During one storied appearance in 1971, Steve opened for Kris Kristofferson at the Quiet Knight. That evening, Paul Anka, who had come to see Kristofferson, caught Steve's act and was so impressed that he arranged for a New York recording session that led to a contract with Buddah Records and a first album ("Steve Goodman"). For the next 13 years, Steve continued to record and tour widely, often performing solo.

His life, both on and off the stage, was full of contrasts. The most obvious was the disparity between his compact stature (5'3") and gigantic stage presence. As one who saw him perform at the 1974 Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto, I saw Steve—alone on stage with just with his Martin D-18 guitar—enthral a crowd of over 500 people. Ever the showman, he told hilarious stories, played eye-popping guitar, and delighted and moved the audience with his singing. Ranging across the musical map—from novelty songs such as "Lincoln Park Pirates" (about the evils of a Chicago towing company) to the wrenching a cappella "Ballad of Penny Evans" (about a bitter Vietnam war widow)—Steve earned a standing ovation and several encores. Beyond brilliant technical skills, what made his performance compelling was that he radiated the message: "I'm just having a blast up here."

Steve's uninhibited, devil-may-care persona on-stage contrasted with an unassuming, more subdued private side. At Mariposa, an hour after his bravura performance, I chanced upon him sitting on his guitar case, quietly demonstrating some guitar licks to four or five fans. He seemed as happy sharing music

Perhaps the most puzzling contrast was that of his performing success and his comparatively modest record sales. Even after a move to southern California in 1980 to develop a more mainstream sound, Steve never had a hit album. (He would often joke in concert, "I will now play a medley of my hit," then launch into "City of New Orleans.") Although his songs have been covered by dozens of artists ranging from Joan Baez to Chet Atkins, his studio albums never captured the magic of his shows. To many who saw him perform solo, less was more; his studio efforts often sounded overproduced, with string and horn arrangements submerging Steve's talents as a folksinger and acoustic guitarist. Fortunately, many of his live performances were also recorded, and these continue to draw new listeners.

One wonders what course Goodman's career might have taken had he lived, since he died at an age when many singer-songwriters are just gaining a following. The revival of acoustic-based, folk-oriented music in the 1990s would probably have brought new generations to his music. It is likely that Steve would



Despite the commercial failure of his first album, Goodman (seen here holding his first child) had earned enormous respect among his peers in the music industry, as evidenced by the fact that musicians John Prine, Marvin Gardens (the alias for Jimmy Buffett), and Bob Landy (the anagram for Bob Dylan) appeared on his second album, "Somebody Else's Troubles" (1972).

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and conversation with a few strangers as entertaining the masses on stage. Another testimony comes from Officer Tom Lovejoy of the College's security office, who played with Steve several times in the early 1970s: "Steve had this public side which was full of fun: 'Lincoln Park Pirates,' 'Chicken Cordon Blues,' and all that. But I sensed, in private, a deeper, more melancholy side that didn't come out in his performing. He didn't strike me as a complete free spirit. Off the stage, he was a pretty intense guy who was quiet and introspective."

now be enjoying a place of honor in a celebrated group of folk-oriented performers that includes Bob Dylan (who played pseudonymously on Steve's second album), Bruce Springsteen, Emmylou Harris, and Bonnie Raitt. As it is, he left a rich body of songs and recordings in addition to the memories of his live performances. Steve Goodman's ashes may be buried in Wrigley Field, but his musical legacy lives on. ■

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