

New Biography Recalls St. Croix Stint by 'City of New Orleans' Songwriter

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Sept. 16, 2007 — Singer-songwriter Steve Goodman packed a lot of life into his 36 years, including a busman's holiday on St. Croix in 1975 when he braved the depths of the Caribbean Sea and found inspiration for a song that was later popularized by Jimmy Buffett, "Banana Republics."

If people know Goodman's work, it's usually through other artists' performances of his songs. "The City of New Orleans" is his best-known tune, made popular by both Arlo Guthrie and Willie Nelson. It's a train song with a chorus that gave a name to a long-running television talk show: "Good morning, America, how are you?" Another Goodman classic, "You Never Even Call Me By My Name" — a/k/a "the perfect country and Western song" — became a radio hit in a version by legendary rowdy David Allan Coe. In Coe's slightly altered version, the final chorus begins: "I was drunk the day my mama got out of prison."

Next week will mark the 23rd anniversary of Goodman's death from leukemia, which came Sept. 20, 1984. But the work of the Chicago entertainer lives on via his records, the music of friends and collaborators such as John Prine and an exhaustive new 800-page biography of Goodman by Seattle journalist Clay Eals, a longtime fan.

"I wrote a tribute obituary for Steve when he died in 1984," Eals says. "I think that's where the seeds were sown. This is the story of a guy's life, but it's also the story of an era."

Eals' book, *Steve Goodman: Facing the Music*, is an oversized paperback thick with anecdotes and photos. The more than 1,000 people who contributed to the author's understanding of Goodman run the gamut of American culture in the second half of the 20th century, from Steve Martin, Studs Terkel and Hillary Clinton to Doc Watson, Bonnie Raitt and David Geffen. Goodman opened for Martin during his coliseum comedy shows in the "wild and crazy guy" era, but despite that exposure and the popular songs he wrote, Goodman's name never quite entered the national consciousness.

"An old boss of mine once said, 'What you gotta understand about Clay is he wants to write about the *nearly* famous,'" Eals says with a laugh. The author collected 75 rejection letters before finally finding a publisher in ECW Press out of Toronto. "When they would go beyond a form letter, they would say, 'I love the proposal and the sample chapters, but he's not big enough to do a book on,'" Eals says.

But he stuck to his guns: "I had this mantle on my shoulders to write the best book I could. Why write the 50th book on Elvis?"

'Down to the Tropical Sun'

Goodman's working vacation on St. Croix covers about three pages, including stories from and about several local characters — diving instructors, "wharf rats" and a 6-foot-8 Crucian who dressed in the manner of an African tribesman and called himself Jungle Prince. The trip came about through Goodman's performances at a legendary Washington, D.C., nightclub called the Cellar Door. In 1974, one of the club's owners, Jimmy Geisler, opened a sister club in the Virgin Islands called the Foggy Bottom, a nickname for Washington.

"It started as a result of my being on vacation down there," says Geisler, who now lives in New Mexico. "I went down to see a friend and just found out that I really liked living there."

Christiansted in 1976. (Photos courtesy of Deborah McColl.)

At the time, the local economy was in a tailspin following the Fountain Valley massacre, which happened 35 years ago this month. (See ["Fountain Valley Put V.I. in Unwanted Spotlight."](#)) The Sept. 6, 1972, shooting at a St. Croix golf course owned by the Rockefeller family left eight people dead and eight wounded, and the tourism industry collapsed. But rent was cheap, and Geisler and a partner from the Cellar Door took a chance.

"After the golf course problems and stuff like that, hotel occupancy back then was just miserable," he says. They took over a space in the King Christian Hotel in Christiansted, running the Foggy Bottom as a restaurant and nightclub that gradually began to draw a number of well-known U.S. artists, including Buffett, Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary, jazz pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines, part-time St. Croix resident Victor Borge and the Starland Vocal Band, a one-hit wonder still remembered for its 1976 smash "Afternoon Delight."

"As it turned out, the woman that owned the hotel (Betty Sperber) had been in the music talent agency business in New York," Geisler says. "She made us an even better deal than she originally intended because she liked the idea of having legitimate entertainment."

In addition to the mainland performers, the Foggy Bottom also featured local talent. "We had

steel-drum bands and stuff on the weekends, Sunday afternoons," Geisler says. A series of rooms gave patrons a variety of options.

"It had two rooms — three if you count the waterfront bar," Geisler says. "The bar itself was the hull of an old sailing boat. The front room was just a bar, with tables and chairs, but it also had magazines and books. The main dining room was kind of like a Holiday Inn dining room most of the time. When we had entertainment there, we would pull the curtains. It was open air — it looked out on the pool on one side and the waterfront on the other. When we closed the curtains, we literally turned it into an old-fashioned nightclub. It drew a lot of people for the right acts. People hung out during the day in the front bar."

Goodman and his family arrived on St. Croix in time for the Christmas holidays in 1975. His wife, Nancy, and their two young children joined him. "But upon his arrival with Nancy and the girls, Steve found the surroundings anything but idyllic," Eals writes, recounting the golf-course shooting and the collapse of the tourist trade. "Marijuana traffickers disguised their cargo underwater in black plastic bales that they termed 'square grouper' fish. Stories abounded of tourist abductions, and strolling through town were intimidating American eccentrics, including a gruff, sullen ogre who looked like a cross between Popeye and a pirate."

At first, Eals writes, Goodman felt betrayed. St. Croix in 1975 was no place for a family, he believed. But gradually he relaxed and began to try some of the local attractions, including scuba diving, and started to get used to the place.

'First You Learn the Native Customs'

The guy who took him diving was Brian Friedman, a Los Angeles native who fled to the warmth of St. Croix after a stint in the North Atlantic with the U.S. Coast Guard. "I was going to go visit for two weeks and ended up staying for 21 years," he says. Eventually he opened his own dive shop on the Christiansted waterfront, Pressure Ltd., in 1975.

"Back then we used to say, 'Christiansted, Frederiksted or go to bed instead,'" Friedman says, laughing. "I came there in June of '73 when the island was at its lowest. But people were starting new businesses, and some of the big shops on St. Thomas started coming over. Tourism was starting to spring back."

Performers at the Foggy Bottom didn't make much money from the gigs, but they got a free trip to the Caribbean and perks such as free sailing and scuba-diving trips. Friedman was part of a loose consortium of sailors called Salty Dogs. He took a number of performers, including Goodman, out to Buck Island Reef National Monument on his 22-foot boat.

"The guy was magical as far as when you meet him," Friedman says. "He was just one of the nicest people you could ever meet."

As Eals re

counts in *Facing the Music*, Goodman struggled with scuba diving. The masks used at the time afforded no peripheral vision. "He had a horrible, terrible time of it," Friedman recalls.

"He was very claustrophobic — he really had a terrible time putting his face in the water. We went out six times before we got him to complete a little bit of a dive. He just wouldn't quit."

Most people would have quit before making that many tries, but not Goodman.

"He'd get down there and you'd see the eyes getting a little big," Friedman says. "He wouldn't panic — he'd just indicate he was getting a little uncomfortable. But if you can get comfortable in a few feet, then you go down to 10 feet, and so on. We finally got to do a little diving off Buck Island."

Like most of Goodman's friends and acquaintances, Friedman didn't know the singer had leukemia. "I don't recall knowledge of his sickness," he says. "I had people who would hide or mask symptoms for fear that I wouldn't let them dive — which I wouldn't, if I didn't know the effects of pressure on their condition."

Goodman persevered despite the claustrophobia, and Friedman became friends with him during his stay on St. Croix. "He was just a wonderful little munchkin of a guy," says Friedman, who now lives in Panama City Beach, Fla, and operates dive-training boats for the U.S. Navy. "I would go listen to him play all the time."

In addition to the Foggy Bottom performers who came there, the dock from which Friedman sailed achieved fame a few years later when it was featured on a long-running TV soap opera. "Agnes Nixon, the creator of 'All My Children,' was from St. Croix," Friedman says. "She would try to write it into the show a lot. When Erica (Kane) went on her honeymoon, you could see her walking in front of boats and things on that dock."

The local paper at the time ran a regular column summarizing the action on the show. "It was called 'All Me Children Dem,'" Friedman says. "It told what happened that week in Crucian."

'In the Cheap Hotels and Bars'

One of the most memorable anecdotes in Eals' description of Goodman's time on St. Croix concerns Jungle Prince, the local character who dressed in African garb and stood a foot and a half taller than the 5-foot-2 singer. "He'd just parade around through town in this getup that was interesting, to say the least," Geisler says.

Here's how Eals describes the scene:

"Wandering into the club one night was a drunken hulk who called himself Jungle Prince, dressed like a native by wearing dreadlocks, loincloth, feathers and beads and 'stomped his feet and hollered at people in gibberish that he made up on the spot.' Steve yelled across the room to Geisler, 'Jimmy, who's your friend?' and summoned Jungle Prince to the stage."

In writing "Banana Republics," Goodman turned a pejorative term for equatorial dictatorships on its head. He used poetic license to give the setting a Hispanic flavor, and aimed his barbs not at the Crucians but rather at mainlanders such as Geisler:

Expatriated Americans

Feeling so all alone

Telling themselves the same lies

That they told themselves at home

Late at night you can find them

In the cheap hotels and bars

Hustling the senioritas while they dance beneath the stars

Spending their renegade pesos

On a bottle of rum and a lime
Singing "Give me some words we can dance to
Or a melody that rhymes"

Down in the banana republics
Things aren't as bright as they seem
None of the natives are buying
Any second-hand American dreams

"He got pissed at me for kind of copping out," Geisler says. "The line about expatriated Americans — that was about me. He told me it was. He told us we were too young to retire, and we were just kind of running away from a whole life we had to live. Coming from him, his situation, it was a comment you had to take to heart a little bit."

But the criticism of "America's Paradise" was gentle, muted rather than pointed.

"He had his preconceptions dashed, and that's where 'Banana Republics' came from," Eals says. "Goodman never really wrote a vicious song. It's more about disappointment, more of a lament. Some people consider it the ultimate Buffett song."

Geisler kept the Foggy Bottom open another five years or so after Goodman's visit before returning to Washington and working for the burgeoning Cellar Door concert-promotion business. Both he and Friedman blame several factors for the downward spiral that hit the territory by the end of the '70s: skyrocketing inflation, interest rates and unemployment during the waning years of the Carter Administration; a general decline in travel away from the continental United States after the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis; and a plane crash on April 27, 1976, that shut down the then-Harry S Truman Airport on St. Thomas for months.

"Tourism went to hell, and people had to default on loans," Friedman says. "The prime rate hit 21.5 percent. A lot of businesses, including mine, closed down in 1980."

As for the Foggy Bottom, "the club was doing fairly well right up until that American Airlines plane crash over on St. Thomas," Geisler says. "It was too hard to keep going in the manner that we were trying to do it. The airline crash had turned it back into the state that it was in '74. We made money over the course of two years, and everybody got out. It was a great time."

Goodman eventually moved to the West Coast, and Geisler followed. They remained close. "I saw him probably two weeks before he died," Geisler says. "It got past the professional relationship to just being friends."

The singer went to Seattle for leukemia treatment, and died in a hospital there when Eals was a local weekly newspaper editor. "I was shocked," he says. "I didn't even know he was sick."

One of Goodman's best-loved songs was written three years before his death: "A Dying Cub Fan's Last Request," a tongue-in-cheek lament for a long-suffering fan of the perpetual also-ran Chicago Cubs.

Eals had been a fan since first seeing Goodman on a television special with Arlo Guthrie and Hoyt Axton called "Arlo's Gang" in 1974. "I remember sitting and looking at that little black-and-white TV and thinking, 'This guy is amazing,'" Eals says. "His head was bobbing like a

bobble doll. He had this commanding presence, even on the TV."

One of the biggest challenges in capturing Goodman's spirit for the book came in conveying his stage presence, Eals says: "His biggest success was onstage. The best Goodman was live Goodman. The book is kind of crazy-making, because I'm writing about a guy whose importance and his greatest effect on people is ephemeral, live. You gotta see him to understand. It is a challenge."

One of the best ways to experience Goodman's entertaining style now is to watch the DVD "Live from Austin City Limits and More," featuring a 1977 concert. On it, the short fireball of a singer performs many of his best-known songs, including "Banana Republics," bouncing on the balls of his feet and radiating infectious enthusiasm. Unfortunately, Goodman's vocal range didn't match his expansive songwriting, and his reedy, sometimes quavery voice held him back in an era when folk-oriented singer-songwriters such as James Taylor and Joni Mitchell became huge pop stars.

Before *Facing the Music*, Eals wrote two other books: a history of West Seattle published in 1987, and *Every Time a Bell Rings*, a 1996 book about actress Karolyn Grimes. Grimes played Jimmy Stewart's daughter, Zuzu, in Frank Capra's classic 1946 Christmas movie "It's a Wonderful Life," then soldiered on through a seemingly endless series of personal tragedies. A similar theme of perseverance runs through the Goodman book, and Eals interviewed hundreds of people to bring his story to life.

"To me that's the strength of the book, is the many voices," Eals says. "Good journalism is shoe leather and going to see people, but also getting their stories while they're still alive." For more information about Eals and *Steve Goodman: Facing the Music*, visit clayeals.com.

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