

MUSIC

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Chicago folk legend Steve Goodman died of leukemia in 1984 at 36. But thanks to a recently unearthed recording that hit store shelves earlier this month, it feels as if the singer-songwriter is more alive than ever.

"Steve Goodman: Live at the Earl of Old Town" (Red Pajamas Records) features Goodman performing live at the Chicago folk club in 1978. It's a high-quality recording that captures him in peak form, singing about the Lincoln Park Pirates and his beloved Cubs, and performing his own version of "City of New Orleans," the Goodman-penned number that became a hit for Arlo Guthrie. From beginning to end, Goodman's spirit crackles off the grooves.

"I don't deal with Steve like he's gone," says Al Bunetta, Goodman's longtime manager and co-owner of Red Pajamas Records. "He was so big in life I haven't stopped working for this guy, period."

Bunetta's fervor for his late client seems heartfelt, not hype, and "Live at the Earl of Old Town" is a moving reminder of why Steve Goodman was such a beloved figure.

The folk scene

Along with revered troubadour John Prine and dulcet-voiced Iowa transplant Bonnie Koloc, Goodman's name is synonymous with the Chicago folk scene of the late 1960s and '70s. He came to the fore at a time when the city teemed with acoustic folk clubs, when venues such as the Quiet Knight and the Earl of Old Town were hotbeds for up-and-coming talent.

Goodman, who used such icons as the first Mayor Daley and the Cubs as grist for his lyrical mill, sang many of his songs with a grin and played with a skilled picker's flair. Although he went on to record at the major-label level, he never became a commercial powerhouse. That didn't matter to the die-hard fans who embraced him.

Goodman was also a skilled guitarist, and his instrumental precision is on ample display on the live recording. On one of the CD's highlight tracks, harmonica whiz Corky Siegel joins Goodman for a bluesy jam on the gospel standard "I'll Fly Away."

"Steve took the ball and ran with it in terms of joy," says Siegel, recalling the appeal of his friend. "He was right in tune with offering who he was. He was able to share who he

was, how he was made -- all those things that made him Steve Goodman -- with the world in a very direct way."

It was record producer Jim Tullio, a close Goodman friend and colleague, who rediscovered the tapes that would become the Earl of Old Town live release. The tapes were originally stored at the Chicago Recording Company. Two years after Goodman's death, the CRC called Bunetta and asked what he wanted to do with the recordings. Bunetta called Tullio, who retrieved the tapes and took them to his Winnetka home for safekeeping.

In the ensuing years, Bunetta and Tullio became busy with other projects and forgot about the recordings. Six months ago, Tullio came across the box. "I called Al and said, 'You'll never believe what I just found.' And Al had completely forgotten about it, which I had too."

They decided it was worth checking out. After the tapes were transferred to a digital format, Tullio was knocked out by what he heard.

Prime time

"Steve's guitar-playing is just stunning," says Tullio, who went on to mix the record. "This is Goodman in his element at the Earl of Old Town. And '78 was his prime. Steve was at his best then. He was still in remission at the time, he was feeling great. It's just a fantastic record. Al decided to put it out. I think it's very timely."

"A lot of emotion is conjured up with that discovery," Bunetta says. "First and foremost, it wasn't an accident. Stevie planned it. Things come at their time, I believe that."

As close as Bunetta was to Goodman, even he admits he was surprised upon first hearing the live tapes. They were a vibrant refresher course on just how fiery Goodman was as a guitarist.

"I didn't remember Steve as a guitar player as great as it was on that tape. Unbelievable," Bunetta says. "We spent so much time together, he was my best friend. And I didn't remember him being that great, and I mean over-the-top great. I remember always wanting him to do an instrumental record, and he never did. And that's the only regret I have, period."

Although Goodman was first diagnosed with leukemia at 20, he kept his illness quiet and his spirits up. Even during the worst of times, his friends and family say Goodman never complained. "There was no reason to," says his mother, Minnette Goodman. "The alternative is to roll over and die, and that wasn't who he was."

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