



'City of New Orleans'

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Here's a story about Chicago, Thanksgiving Day and right and wrong, featuring Steve Goodman, Arlo Guthrie and John Denver.

Goodman is the much-beloved singer and songwriter who grew up in Albany Park and the suburbs. He was terrific in his day, fought leukemia all his adult life and died too young. That's him singing "Go, Cubs, Go" at Wrigley Field after every Cubs win.

He's the Chicago part of this story.

Guthrie is the popular folk singer — and the stand-up guy, as you will see — who scored a big hit when he recorded "City of New Orleans," the now-classic train song written by Goodman. Every year on Thanksgiving Day, WXRT plays Guthrie's loopy old hippie song, "Alice's Restaurant" — all 18 minutes and 20 seconds of it.

That qualifies Guthrie for the Thanksgiving Day hook in this story.

And then there's Denver, a big star and a real turkey.

He's the right and wrong of the story, or at least the wrong.

The whole tale, in impressive detail, is told in an exhaustive new Goodman biography, *Steve Goodman: Facing the Music*, by Clay Eals.

It 'needed something'

The story begins in 1971 in a back room of the old Quiet Knight music club, where the relatively unknown Goodman pitched a song he had just written — "City of New Orleans" — to a visiting young star, Guthrie. Arlo liked the tune enough to ask for a tape.

Half a year later, Guthrie played the song for Denver. As Denver later recalled that moment, Guthrie "suggested I might want to record it." But as Guthrie recalled it, he said to Denver: "Don't record this song because I'm doing it now myself."

No matter. Denver struck quickly. He phoned Goodman and set up a meeting in New York. He wanted to record the song, he said, but felt it "needed something."

What happened at that meeting, in a Manhattan hotel room, is truly sad. Denver suggested all kinds of changes to the song — most of them cheesy — and Goodman, desperate for a hit, went along. Goodman figured he had about eight months to live — as he bluntly told Denver — and wanted to make money for his wife.

The power of "City of New Orleans" flows from its vivid and concrete lyrics, which Denver utterly failed to appreciate. Perfect phrases describing mothers rocking babies to the "rhythm of the rails" were replaced with mush such as "The days are full of restless, and dreams are full of memories."

"Old black men" became "old gray men" — how's that for groveling before political correctness?

And most horribly of all, "Good night, America, how are you?" became "Good night, America, I love you."

As Eals writes in his Goodman book: "Vivid description and commentary had been sacrificed for softer, cloying, emotional language — the type of 'commercial' lyrics that middle-of-the-road America" expected from Denver.

Goodman agreed to every change, apparently so eager for a hit song he could talk himself into anything, so he wasn't exactly Denver's victim, even if he did rant in private to friends.

But when he later picked up the new Denver album and read the writing credit for "City of New Orleans," he was furious. It read: "By Steve Goodman and John Denver."

"That bastard," Goodman said.

'I can't stay mad at the guy'

Time passed, and Goodman seethed and Denver heard about it. Gee whiz, Denver told a reporter, people were saying he had "ripped off" Goodman's song.

But the two men patched things up, more or less, during a tense talk backstage at a show in Philadelphia.

"Did you get it all worked out?" another musician asked Goodman.

"Yeah," he replied. "I can't stay mad at the guy."

But Arlo Guthrie could.

'They steal what's good'

Guthrie, who would soon record



John Denver



Chicago singer-songwriter Steve Goodman, pictured in the early 1980s, was desperate for a hit when John Denver insisted on recording "City of New Orleans" — then suggested all sorts of changes in the lyrics. | SUN-TIMES LIBRARY

his own hit version of "City of New Orleans" — a slowed-down interpretation that revealed the wistful beauty of Goodman's original lyrics — had been around the music business his entire life. He was the son of Woody Guthrie.

He knew what kind of ugly stuff went on, and he was appalled by what Denver had done to Goodman.

"I went ballistic," he told Eals. "I went what could only be described as letters that are not part of the alphabet. I went crazy. I didn't understand it."

Denver was "a good guy," Guthrie said, but the way he took advantage of Goodman, who was seriously ill, was unforgivable. It was the kind of theft he'd seen all too often.

"They steal what's good in creative people all over the world," he told Eals. "I hate those guys. I don't care who they are."

When Guthrie himself played his



Arlo Guthrie

big hit, he always gave Goodman his due, saying, "Here's a song Steve Goodman wrote."

But when Denver sang the song on stage, he typically failed to credit Goodman. He introduced the song with mock indignation, in fact, griping that Guthrie's version had become a bigger hit. The implication was that Denver had written the song.

For three years, Guthrie stewed and fumed. Just hearing Denver's name would set him off. Finally, Guthrie's wife, Jackie, had had enough.

"You gotta stop this," she told Arlo. "You gotta talk to the guy."

Arlo was reluctant, so Jackie went ahead and arranged a meeting with Denver, at the home of an acquaintance in San Francisco.

Guthrie walked into an upstairs room, where Denver was sitting at a desk, and — as he later told Eals — started reading Denver "the riot act."

"Arlo," Denver said, "you gotta believe me. I didn't do that."

"Well, you recorded the song," Guthrie shot back.

"Yeah, I did that," Denver replied, "but I would never steal stuff from other people. My manager did that."

"Look, it's not just stealing a song. This guy's sick," Guthrie said. "That's where the money's going. You can't take from that. You can't let the manager do that. You are the one responsible."

"You're right," Denver replied. "You're absolutely right. Let's be friends. I'll take care of it. I'm going to make it right."

"John," Guthrie said, "you're on."

Quit singing it after that

Did Denver "take care of it"? Hard to say. Eals was unable to nail down how Goodman and Denver split royalties on the song — or whether Goodman's cut was increased after Guthrie had it out with Denver.

Eals does note that Denver quit singing the song after that, which could only be bad for Goodman.

"The poor thing for Steve was then that John stopped doing the song," another songwriter told Eals. "I never heard him sing it after. He was embarrassed about it."

Steve Goodman died Sept. 20, 1984, cut down by the leukemia he had fought for 15 years.

Tonight at 7 p.m. at Lake Forest College, Eals is leading a big tribute to Goodman, with plenty of good live music. It's a free show. For more information, call (847) 735-6010.

And John Denver died Oct. 12, 1997, when he crashed into the ocean in a two-seat experimental aircraft.

Arlo Guthrie, fortunately, continues to tour the country, now with his whole Guthrie clan. On Saturday, he'll be doing his annual Thanksgiving concert at Carnegie Hall.

But if you can't make it to New York, I'd suggest tuning in to WXRT at 11 a.m. Thursday.

"Alice's Restaurant" is no "City of New Orleans," but you could do worse on Thanksgiving Day than to hang out for 18 minutes and 20 seconds with a stand-up guy.

Tom McNamee's "The Chicago Way" column runs Mondays.