

Steve Goodman: Fighting Commercialism in the Reagan Decade

In the thrall of disco and on the eve of punk, the American music industry didn't know what to do with Steve Goodman. Riding the tide that was ushering in the Reagan decade, record execs had little patience for a troubadour who electrified audiences but couldn't produce a pop chart-topper of his own.

That's the backdrop for these two Goodman shows at the now-defunct Headliners rock club next to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. This pair of sets, augmented by ace mandolinist Jethro Burns, covers a lot of musical ground, and the audiences are treated to a most enjoyable evening, which is all that Goodman ever asked of himself. Listen between the lines, however, and you'll hear signs of Steve's imminent commercial collapse.

During the first five songs of the first set, an oblivious drunk puts on a flailing dance as if to symbolize a nation that just wanted to bounce mindlessly to the Bee Gees and Donna Summer. With witty asides, Goodman deals deftly with the visual heckler ("I wish I was loaded as he is, so you can't get down on him for that") and improvises hilarious, well-received rhymes in the middle of "This Hotel Room" to summon the club owner: "So would you rather hear me stand up here and shout/Or find out whether this poor guy gets thrown out?"

But it wasn't long before Goodman himself was "thrown out." Set for release the next month was his fifth Asylum LP in six years, "Hot Spot," a slick but strained attempt to reach the homogenized AM radio

market. Its sales never took off, and the once-daring label soon dropped Steve and others from its roster.

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On this night in Madison, Goodman thumbs his nose at that fate. He opens with three timely, unrecorded "newspaper" songs: a clever but borderline

racist attack on the red-hot Iranian hostage crisis, a parody of Congress' Chrysler bailout to the tune of the 1966 Temptations classic, "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," and a sarcastic plaint about the American Airlines plane crash that killed all 271 occupants. Moments later, Steve trots out a novelty send-up of punk, reggae, Springsteen and ABBA, co-written with the National Lampoon's Sean Kelly: "What Were You Expecting ... Rock 'n Roll?" (None of these songs has appeared on an official Goodman LP or CD.)

Early in the second set, Steve does perform the three most palatable "Hot Spot" songs: a rewrite of Billy Joel's "Piano Man" called "Bobby, Don't Stop," a trifle about young lust called "Danger" and the delectable "Sdrawkcab Klat (Talk Backwards)," the latter two

written with Michael Smith. But the trio of tunes seems little more than a nod to promotional obligation.

Through the rest of the shows are huge helpings of favorites leavened with delightful surprises, such as three Shel Silverstein gems (including the devastating "I'm So Good That I Don't Have to Brag"), a rare, off-color Carl Martin blues, Jimmy Buffett's "Peanut Butter Conspiracy" and an inspired medley, performed with Jim Post, of "Baby What You Want Me to Do," "Come a Little Bit Closer" and the salacious "Was It You Who Did the Pushin'" (to the tune of "Humoresque"). Jethro provides sturdy support, especially during two guitar-string breaks.

Some think Goodman's departure from Asylum led to his best

recordings two years later, for his upstart Red Pajamas label. If so, these Madison shows prove that Steve was only momentarily distracted by the demands of bland pop culture and never really lost his magic.

A fitting bookend, the 40-minute bonus segment is a laid-back, late-night radio appearance from six and a half years earlier, when Goodman was on the verge of signing with Asylum. With Philly pals Lew London and Saul Broudy, Steve regales the genial Gene Shay with eight songs, including Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," a complete version of Michael Smith's "The Wonderful World of Sex" and a voice-perfect imitation of Shel Silverstein's paean to the vernacular, "The Hip Song." True to the medium of radio, it's an intimate, heartwarming coda.