



THE SPOT* LIGHT



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INTRODUCTION

We at The Spot* have begun this publication to showcase local musicians.

WHY?

To raise awareness and appreciation of our star-quality local performers. Many don't realize that our relatively humble local music venues house career musicians who have seen the world while performing, and have rich and colorful stories to tell. Starting with their "life stories."

SPOT* LIGHT ON: STEVE THOMA

Steve is a drummer in several different local groups: LC Diamonds, B-Side Blues, Psychedellos, among others.

Born: July 29, 1950 Reno, Nevada.

Early influences: Buddy Holly, Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley and Cubby O'Brien (original Disney Mouseketeer) Editor's Note: off all these, Thoma says that Cubby influenced him most. When he saw Cubby, he knew he would be a drummer too.

First Instrument: Pots and pans. Drum kit came much later.

Learned Music From: Self-taught

Opened for: Van Morrison, The Doors, Grateful Dead, Eric Burdon

Words To Live By: *If ifs and buts were candy and nuts, oh what a party I'd have.*

"My self-promise was to dedicate the rest of my life to performing music. Music had--quite literally-- set me free."

Happiness is: *A dog*

As You Get Older: *The pull of gravity seems to get stronger.*

Worst job: *Swamper (loading boxes of lemons onto flatbed trucks)*

Best job: Every gig I have ever had.

One regret: *No regrets.....*



SOUNDS OF THE SIXTIES -- Adding their "rockin'" sounds to Ventura Marina festivities will be the "Two Plus Two" band. Members are, from left, Steve Maxwell, 15, Steve Thoma, 15, Steve Sessions, 15, and Bob Fiorentino, 15, all of Ventura.

Thoma's early days



I have never missed: *A gig.*

There is nothing more boring than: *Some old dude answering questions about himself.*

Fear is: *What the mainstream media is shoving down our throats.*

Pain is: *As real as it gets*

For the record: *I'm straight (and single)*

I like it when: *People dance while I'm playing.*

Some people say: *I take too many selfies.*

The hardest thing I ever had to do: *interferon treatment*

You have to be careful: *When you wish for something, you just might get it.*



STEVE THOMA: THE INTERVIEW

By: Glenn W. Peterson

I interviewed Steve Thoma by phone. I spent nearly two hours getting his unabridged life story. It was interesting enough to keep me on the phone that long. For people who know my level of patience with telephone calls, this would seem like a big deal. And it is. Both Steve and his story are quite interesting.

Let's start with the initial impression. I met Steve about a year ago. I have watched him perform several times. He has an aura of contentment. Like a guy who knows exactly where he is on his life's journey and is 100% satisfied with it, both from the standpoint of where he now is and where he will be tomorrow and the next day and for the rest of the journey. Near the end of the interview, Steve told me that he keeps things simple and likes them that way. That made perfect sense after I had heard his whole story. Because his story is anything but simple.

Spoiler alert: Steve shared quarters with Robert Redford. But to hear about that, you have to read on.

I MET A MAN IN RENO

Steve was born in 1950 in Reno, Nevada. He was born Reno because there was no hospital in Sparks, where his parents then resided. Steve was the middle child among three boys. When he was about two years old, his family moved to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. His

father was in the insurance business, and back in the 1950s a good company soldier went wherever the company needed him to go. Once in Texas, Steve was near the epicenter of the earthquake-- called rock 'n roll-- that was beginning to shake the nation. As expected, he was influenced early by Buddy Holly, Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Bill Haley and the Comets.

Like many youngsters of that time, he was quite easily seduced by the forces of that music.

However, none of Steve's family members were musically inclined. In his family, he found encouragement but no musical camaraderie. He found his first musical comrade in Cubby O'Brien, one of the original Disney Mouseketeers. In awe, he watched the grainy black and white television images of Cubby's exploits on the drums. He began to emulate what he saw, starting out with wooden spoons on pots and pans from his mother's kitchen.

Recognizing his passion, his father gave Steve a pair of bongo drums that he purchased in Mexico on a business trip. Thus, Steve graduated from pots and pans to the bongos. In the late 1950s, Steve's family moved to Redondo Beach, California, where the emerging surf music would influence him; notably Dick Dale & The Del Tones.

He then became less interested in toys and television. His obsession with 45 LP records displaced his interest in much else. He continued to amuse his family with his unrestrained and hammy performances on the bongos. He tried his hand on the snare drum, and whatever he could lay his sticks on in the school marching band.

He did not get his first drum kit until 1960, when he was ten years old. By that time, his family had again relocated from Redondo Beach to Ventura, California. By 1962, surf music had begun to overtake the Rockabilly genre, and Steve was well-positioned to jump on board (pun intended), while living in the heart of one of the most revered surfing venues on the California coast. At the ripe age of 12, he formed his first band, named "The Grotes." A "grote" was a marine term for a lint ball on a soldier's blanket, a *punishable offense*. Steve assumed that "grote" was also shorthand for "grotesque," so the name amused his 12-yr.-old mind, much the same way that a loud fart in a public place might do so.

THE GROTES

The Grotes found immediate success. They won Junior High School talent shows. They played mostly covers. They got an agent, who insisted that the name "The Grotes" was not acceptable. He would change the name of the band to "2 + 2," a name Steve never liked. 2 + 2

continued their success. It picked up sponsors (such as Fender) and won *The Battle of The Bands* at the 1965 Teen Fair.

By age 17, music had become Steve's livelihood. His quick success seemed other-worldly. He had played the Hollywood Palladium, right alongside Sonny and Cher. He had opened for Van Morrison, The Doors, and The Grateful Dead.

MARRIAGE, PARENTHOOD, DRIFTING

He rode this wave until 1979. Married with a daughter on the way, he sold his drum kit for \$500 in an effort to stabilize and "normalize" his life as a husband and father. Steve sidelined himself from 1979 to 1984. He was out of the music game completely. How far out, you ask? Well let's just say that, during this time, he co-owned a "Hippie" health food store in Salt Lake City, lived in Hawaii, and "drifted for a while." His "drifting" eventually took him to the resort area of Lake Norfork, Arkansas, where he worked as both a ski instructor during the day and a restaurant cook at night.

THE ROBERT REDFORD YEARS

While in Arkansas, Steve shared living quarters with a few roommates, one of them was the guitar player in his band. The guitar player was also (as Steve would later learn) a Narc. A confidential informant, of all things! He got Steve busted for having two ounces of pot, but under circumstances that enabled the local Buford T. Justice brigade to charge him both with possession and intent to distribute. Another friend of Steve's was also pinched-- but with much more than two ounces. That "friend" was willing to drop a dime. Steve was unwilling to part with his change. For that reason, Buford T. Justice threw the book at him. He was looking at doing a significant amount of time. "Friend," by contrast, got off lightly.

His case took many years to wind its way through the trial court and court of appeal. Meantime-- out on bail while his case inched its way through the court system-- Steve had moved back to California.

In 1992, Steve was informed by the prosecutors in Arkansas that his appeal had been denied. He needed to come back to Arkansas and turn himself in, and begin serving his 15-yr. sentence. Yes, you read that correctly. 15 YEARS!! Steve said goodbye to his parents and his girlfriend. Unsure when he would next see them. Unsure

whether he could survive that kind of time in an Arkansas prison.

During his first 60 days of incarceration, he was held in a county jail cell while waiting to be processed and assigned a more permanent home inside the Arkansas prison system. While there, he kept hearing bad things-- from inmates and guards-- about Cummins. "Hope that you don't get sent to Cummins, man." "Anywhere but there." "It's the worst place there is, dude." At first, Steve didn't pay that much attention. That is until he heard that Cummins was the prison featured and filmed in the movie, "Brubaker" starring Robert Redford. The screenplay is a (slightly) fictionalized version of the 1969 book, *Accomplices to the Crime: The Arkansas Prison Scandal* by Tom Murton and Joe Hyams, detailing Murton's uncovering of the 1967 prison scandal. The film revealed rampant abuse and corruption in the prison's administration, including open and endemic sexual assault, torture, worm-ridden diseased food, insurance fraud and a doctor charging inmates for care.

After two months of biding his time in a county jail cell, Steve was told to pack his shit. Destination: Cummins. His days of drifting and kicking around on sandy Hawaiian beaches were gone forever.

I mentioned above that Steve shared quarters with Robert Redford. That is true. Just not at precisely the same time!

Kidding aside, Steve was assigned an outdoor work detail that he described as "the real Cool-Hand-Luke" shit. Guys on horses with rifles and mirrored aviator sunglasses. Work from sunrise to sunset. Back to the barracks. Sleep. Rinse and repeat. No time for fighting or mischief. Or basketball. Or weight-lifting. No reading, painting, or anything else an inmate is known to do with his time.

When there was finally a break in the work detail, Steve tried to take stock of his surroundings. He heard live guitar music playing-- a Les Paul tune-- from behind a locked door on the grounds. It stirred in him musical passion that had been moth-balled for more than a decade. He had to get behind that door. He pounded and pounded. No answer.

He continued until a visibly annoyed inmate answered it, guitar in hand. Steve introduced himself and asked what was going on. The guitar man said that he was part of the prison band-- a band that was well-known and well-loved in the outside world. A band that had played together (in various formations) since the 1940s. A band that travelled

and toured, playing in all different kinds of venues. A band that made money for the prison. Guitar man also told Steve that the band was down a man and could not tour. Their drummer was sent to maximum security for possession of a shank, thus losing his "trustee" status and the travelling band privileges that went with it.

Steve offered his services. He had to audition TWICE. He was later told the reason: "We've had all kinds of schmucks claiming to be a drummer in order to get out of here." Steve was given a playlist of approximately 90 songs. Most all of them he knew. The heavens parted. He quickly integrated himself with the band members and went on the road. Things really clicked. 15 years was still a long time, but this was the way to do that kind of time, not breaking rocks on an outside work detail with rifles pointed at you.

Things were humming along. Then, one day Guitar man casually told him, "Don't let them do to you what they've done to me." Steve asked for an explanation. What he was told next was a shot to the gut. Guitar man explained that he was only serving a three-year sentence, but his release had been inexplicably detained. No one would say it, but the reason was clear. It was because he was a valuable asset to the band and, therefore, the prison enterprise. Put simply, it was a profit thing for the prison. It was against their business interests to release him. Steve was dumbstruck. The thing he loved doing... the thing that made the prospect of his doing 15 years remotely imaginable... the thing that gave him many privileges of freedom notwithstanding his incarceration... *being in the band*. But being in the band now appeared to be something that would extend his stay beyond anything imaginable. Or tolerable.

Steve started asking questions. He asked why his letters were not getting to his parents or other family members. He started making waves. Soon, he lost his "trustee" status. Without the trustee status, he could not play in the band. So he went from being a Cummins asset to being a Cummins pain-in-the-ass potential liability. He was soon transferred to the correctional facility in West Memphis, Arkansas where he was assigned an office job.

ACT 814

Steve's office job gave him access to things that were completely unavailable to other inmates. One day, "while snooping around," Steve discovered some paperwork pertaining to Act 814, a legislative creation that provided

early release to certain categories of low risk inmates, including first offenders. At Cummins, the prison administration routinely told inmates who asked about Act 814 that it had been repealed. It was against the business interests of the prison to lose any members of its labor force. Steve was astonished when he read about Act 814, and quickly contacted his attorney about it. Steve's attorney discovered that Act 814 had not been repealed, and that Steve was a model candidate for early release. It was as if it was written with Steve's case in mind.

In October 1994, Steve was released in Little Rock, Arkansas. He had served only 20 months! A small fraction of his sentence. He quickly returned to California, and managed the Rubicon Brewery in Sacramento for the next five years. In 1999, he made a promise to himself. That he would dedicate the rest of his days to performing music. This promise came from the realization, that music-- quite literally-- had set him free. Had he not been in that prison band, he would have remained in prison until 2007. He could not begin to wrap his head around that. He felt that music had been a force of divine intervention in his life, and that taking any other path would be irreverent to the forces that had saved him.

While living in Sacramento, Steve found out that he had Hepatitis C. He would deal with that bad news much later.

In 1999, he moved to Reno with his girlfriend, where they bought a house together. He worked for the Maytan Music Center for the next 10 years, and was responsible for establishing their Carson City location. Steve also introduced the innovative idea to construct a music stage on the sales floor, which forever changed the way the retail industry would view musical instrument sales. In 2007, he took on Interferon chemo treatment for Hep C. It was a grueling experience, but ultimately successful. He has remained virus-free since.

LIFE IN LAKE COUNTY

Steve settled in Lake County in 2009. He fell in quickly with the local music scene, and has played with a total of 14 different bands. In 2015, like many of his friends and neighbors, Steve lost nearly all of his possessions (he says 90%) to the Valley Fire. It was, again, a time to start over and re-build his life. By then, Steve was well-versed in do-overs. He took it in stride. The same way that he takes everything in stride. Steve is beyond unflappable.

Steve now resides in Nice and maintains a part time job in Lucerne, working for Lake County Behavioral Health. This enables him to get through the winters, when the local live music business slows to a crawl. He now regularly plays with four different groups, and fills in or sits in with several more. When he is not performing, he is known to dote on his dog, Stella, and to thoroughly enjoy the beauty and tranquility that surround him in Lake County.

Steve continues to view performing live music as his purpose in life. His purpose and salvation, in equal measures. The enjoyment and fulfillment that he gets from his music comes from deep down. To further make the point, Steve fondly quotes Bill Noteman: "When we play, it is always a good time on purpose."

Last summer, The Spot* hosted his 66th Birthday Party, on a warm summer night. He chose to celebrate by turning it into a gig. It was quite a show. But then I realized that Steve doesn't really perform. That's the real Steve back there, drumming away like there's no tomorrow. So it's less of a show, and more Steve letting you into his world. So when you meet Steve--or the next time you see him-- I'm willing to bet that you will notice the same aura of contentment that I did. And now you can readily understand where it comes from.