

A Friend

by Grit Laskin

My shop, doubling as rehearsal space on those evenings, was already amassing its nightly litter of coffee cups, empty bottles and cigarette butts when Stan calmly stated that he just finished a new song that he was hoping we could learn in time to perform. He then turned to me and with his eager grin, vulnerable and triumphant all at once, he announced that he wrote the song in the key of F for the pipes.

'Harris and the Mare' was indeed made for the Northumbrian Smallpipes. It played effortlessly within the musical range of the instrument's home key. I loved to lay it, Stan loved to hear it played, and we both knew that about each other.

I saw that particular grin of Stan's many times before and after that night....

The afternoon was very warm and very sunny. I was scanning the performer's area of one of the last Mariposa festivals to be held on the Toronto islands. Both of my hands clutched a lunch tray covered with deli delicacies as I wove my way through the rows of picnic tables to a shaded empty seat across from Stan. When the general table conversation lulled, Stan asked if I had a spare moment to chat. His tone of voice was hinting at something but I didn't know him well enough then to be able to second guess his intentions. So it was with a rapidly growing curiosity that I shifted over to an empty table with him and tossed off something inane like "what's up?" "Well," he said, "I've been thinking about this for a while, Dad and Mom are with me on this too — how'd you like to make a record for Fogarty's Cove?"

Let me explain to those who are not musicians or singers that recording an album especially a first one, is the dream of almost anyone with any level of musical aspirations. It's the way of legitimizing your musical self in the eyes of everyone — your family, friends, club owners, the list is endless. So to be offered the freedom to do my musical think on a record

at Stan's expense was hard to believe at first. I told him as much but he insisted he was serious. He wanted me to think about repertoire, who I wanted as a producer, where I wanted to do it and all the rest. I was almost speechless. I can be quite gracious at accepting day to day favours and gifts from other people but the big and generous offers like this one was, I have a hard time dealing with.

At the time though I was quite sure Stan was judging the effect his offer was having on me and was loving every second of it. Here was a man in the enviable position of being able to help out his friends. Whether it was collecting the tab for a record or always paying the maximum dollar to anyone who performed with or worked for him or promoting the work done by another whom he believed in. This was always his way.

If you're like myself or many of my friends, you like to dream about how you would share some of your lottery winnings with your friends and family to help pay off their mortgage or buy them the trip they've always dreamed of but couldn't afford. Well, here was Stan who definitely didn't have a million dollars but as soon as a little extra started to accumulate, he must have been 'chomping at the bit' to spread it around and make the struggles of those around him a little easier.

....Stan not only 'fully' occupied in every sense of the word the swivel chair in the so-called office of my shop but when he turned his back on the desk, leaned backward and let his legs sprawl outward, I lost half of the available space in the entire room. I saw him many times in that chair and many a good laugh, many a good talk did we have with me covered in wood dust and relaxed on the couch facing him. Only a few months before he died he had ordered a fourth instrument from me, a second six-string guitar, a cut-away model this time. We were discussing details when

We were settling in to the ninth or maybe tenth evening of rehearsals. Only three days remained until the extended band, cal aspirations. It's the way of legitimizing your musical self in the eyes of everyone — your family, friends, club owners, the list is endless. So to be offered the freedom to do my musical think on a record

the conversation began to drift from inlays and actions. I asked him if he remembered the time when he had remarked to his wife, Ariel, "That Grit, he's such a nice guy, I don't know why I like him." Or the time he and I had invented the term 'clench-brad' to describe a nonexistent but expensive strengthening mechanism which I had, of course, used in the repair of his 12-string neck the first time Air Canada broke it. (It was one way of fattening out the bill to teach the airline a lesson. Since neither of us were ever compensated a penny for the airline's folly, I have no fear of revealing our 'fib'.)

Our conversation shifted back to the matter at hand; the details of this new guitar. It was back again by the way — that grin of his — this time satisfied and excited. It almost never left his face for a moment while we talked.

That day, after he left and I was back at my bench, I kept on reminiscing. There was his first album on which I played and because of which I received the second nick-name of 'the masked luthier of Dupont street'. Or the evening he came to my place to pick up the first guitar I made for him eight years ago and I was so excited to have surpassed his expectations of the instrument. "Boy," I thought, "we'd had a tidy sum of good times and yet we're still just 'pishers'" (to use my dad's term for kids).

I saw him twice after that. Both times were for musical reasons, both were good times and on each occasion I was greeted with a "Hey, Gritsky!", his wonderful grin and a great crushing hug. We've all seen many different sides to Stan, but the friendly, generous and supportive one was what he showed to me every time. I'm glad as hell that I had him as a friend and that he accomplished as much as he did with his short time here. May we all give that much to the world.