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Five Songs, Part 84 (The Reducers/Steve Kaika memorial edition)



The Reducers, eternally. From the 2010 Sailfest in New London. From left: Hugh Birdsall, Peter Detmold and Steve Kaika; Tom Trombley on drums. Photo from Wailingcity.com.

I started putting together this greatly extended Five Songs on Sunday (June 10), knowing what was coming.

I got a Facebook message that morning from my friend Jes Farnsworth, aka Jes Reckless, out here in Fresno. Jes is the frontman for an excellent trio called The Backstabbers, heavily influenced by early punk. Interspersed among their originals (they released their first CD in May) are a bunch of great covers: The Stooges' "Search and Destroy," 999's "Homicide," The Flamin' Groovies' "Shake Some Action," Roky Erickson's "Two-Headed Dog" ... and any of a number of songs by one of my favorite bands ever — one of the most underrated and overlooked bands America has had to offer, The Reducers. From back home, in Connecticut, in New London. Same four guys since 1978: Peter Detmold and Hugh Birdsall, the co-lead singers/co-lead guitarists/songwriters, Steve Kaika on bass, Tom Trombley on drums. Influenced equally by the '70s English pub rock and the early punk Peter and Hughie love so much, they released three tremendous introductory albums in successive years (*The Reducers*, 1983; *Let's Go*, 1984, *Cruise to Nowhere*, 1985), were labeled "America's Best Unsigned Band" by CMJ in '86 and included on an Epic Records *Unsigned* compilation LP. But they never signed with anyone and decided to just keep doing what they were doing, and to a man, they'll tell you it's why

they stayed together all these years. (They explained it in Bill Dumas' 2006 documentary, [The Reducers: America's Best Unsigned Band](#), in which I was happy to be one of the many talking heads.) And despite the imminent mortality we all face, there was something eternal about them, something that spoiled me — many of us — into thinking this would go on forever.



The Reducers canceled a show last December at New London's Bank Street Cafe — their first cancellation in ages — owing to “a bug” Steve contracted. Then, in January, another cancellation. And the word slowly got out that Steve wasn't doing well. In late winter, word got out that it was lung cancer.

Jes happens to be Steve's nephew. I found that out by happy accident in 2005, a year after I moved to Fresno. I wore a Reducers *Shinola* T-shirt to a show at the Starline one night, and the kid at the ticket booth asked, “Are those The Reducers from Connecticut?” “Yesssss,” I said with arched eyebrow. “My buddy's uncle plays in The Reducers.” “Holy shit! Who?” A connection to home! A year later, I finally met Jes, who grew up in Waterford, Steve's hometown, before moving west, and was heavily influenced by his uncle and his band. And Jes (and his father, Robin) and I all happened to be back in Connecticut near summer's end of 2008; the last time I saw The Reducers, that Labor Day Saturday at Ocean Beach Park in New London, Jes actually took Hugh's place on guitar for one song. (It was kinda weird to be standing next to Hughie in the crowd

while The Reducers played.)

With The Backstabbers, I've seen Jes play “Let's Go,” “No Ambition,” “Bums I Used to Know” and, last Friday at Audie's Olympic, on a bill with Peter Case, “Life in the Neighborhood.” It's a song that they'll be recording for a Reducers tribute album Jes is putting together to benefit Steve — who, as a self-employed contractor, had no health insurance. (As of now, there are at least 25 acts who have recorded, or are recording, songs for the disc. I'm supposed to be singing “Out of Step” with them.)

Anyway, he messaged me that he was flying back to Connecticut on Thursday because Steve might not make it through the week, and that he might even be too late by that point.

He got the call around 1 this morning Pacific Time.

Dammit. I was hoping, between Jes flying home and the benefit show that Steve's friends are throwing Friday night at New London's Hygienic Art Park, that he would've lasted the week.

Rick Koster, *The Day* of New London's longtime music writer [did a great piece on the band for this morning](#) — which he, sadly, had to amend after Steve's death — talking about this musical band of brothers, together 34 years, and how they would all get together every Friday in their rehearsal space — partly to play music, partly to suck down Buds (except Hugh) and tell tales and have their own little rock'n'roll-guy version of a sewing circle/*kaffeeklatch*. As he wrote: “An extremely close-knit group, there were no members before these four, and there will be no members after.” In 20/20 hindsight, it did seem as if Rick was writing an obituary — not just for Steve, but the band.

Thirty-four years, the same four guys; probably in the same pairs of Converse Chucks they were wearing then, too. The only musical act I can think of that surpassed them in a track record like that was The Four Tops — same quartet for 43 years, from their formation in 1954 (yes, they worked their asses off for a decade before they became stars) until Lawrence Payton's death in 1997.



New London sits halfway between New Haven and Providence on I-95 — the onetime Whaling City, home to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, with the Electric Boat shipyard building nuclear subs across the Thames River in Groton. Even though one of America's foremost playwrights, Eugene O'Neill, grew up due west in Waterford, and cut his writing teeth as a reporter at *The Day* (and apparently drank in a great many bars there — including the Dutch Tavern, the shot-and-short-glass joint Peter bought with his life partner, Martha Conn, in the late '90s), and even though the city has a healthy and steadily growing art scene, it's definitely a blue-collar city.

And The Reducers always had a blue-collar ethic about them; Hugh, a schoolteacher, is the only one of the bunch with a white-collar job. And Steve was the physical embodiment of that — a self-employed contractor by trade, as mentioned, shaggy blonde haircut, kinda quiet unless you got to know him, a skinny, sinewy, work-toned body, a cigarette and a beer never far away. He looked like a typical blue-collar guy — just give him a hardhat. And he always wore sleeveless

T-shirts on stage, or at least T's with the sleeves torn off, the taut muscles of his arms and shoulders showing, with jeans and Chucks, and he usually looked as if he were heading to or coming from work.

It's an attitude that infused their music from the start: their sneer at the white-collar world ("Company Man"); their disdain of pretense and keeping up with the Joneses ("Fashion of the Times"); the grind of seemingly no-escape everyday life ("Better Homes and Gardens," "Life in the Neighborhood," "No Ambition"); their fear of law enforcement gone amok ("Scared of Cops," "Boys Will Be Boys"); and sheer escapism ("Cruise to Nowhere" and their anthem, "Let's Go"). And their first recording, "Out of Step," from 1980, perfectly captured a sense of alienation that still rings loudly today; it was as if they said, "Let's write a song about a genre they haven't invented yet called Goth."

Punk started out as a blue-collar musical form, and The Reducers never forgot that.

I first saw them in the mid-to-late '80s; I forget whether it was at the Grotto in New Haven or the El'N'Gee Club in New London. What I do know is that it was the first of many times I would see them after that.

The shows at the El'N'Gee — a block or so from the Dutch Tavern — were sort of a religious ritual. It was kind of "Assume the position": Hugh at far stage right, Peter next to him; Steve a distance apart at stage left, Tom's kit set up more on the stage-left side.

I would stand with the Planck brothers, Eric and Rodi, and most of the time Eric's wife, Genia, and sometimes our late friend Lars Schulze, in front of the stage between Peter and Hughie. Sometimes Bill O'Grady would make the trip from New Haven, dancing furiously with us. Anne Castellano, now a New London musician in her own right, would be somewhere in our midst, and Annie MacGowan would be off dancing on her own a distance to our left. MeLinda Dalton would trek down from the Hartford area as well, and there were a lot of other faces I never met who would still be familiar to me today. The first notes — usually around 9:30, in a three-set gig — would be a battle cry, a klaxon call to arms, after which we'd all play our roles, sweating like fiends after the first set and in need of more ice-cold Rolling Rocks. And at show's end, I, along with Rodi or O'Grady, would bang out bottles of Rock loudly on the stage to get them to come back for an encore. And then, for me, the near-hour drive back to New Haven.

The players in the audience would change over the years, and the venues would change as well. But the four guys on stage were constant. And consistent.



The Reducers at the El-N-Gee a long time ago.

Aside from my favorite band, The Fleshtones, seeing The Reducers on a Saturday night was the most fun one could have without a prescription. And I can't tell you how much it killed me in the eight years since I moved West to miss the two bands playing together several times at my favorite music bar, Cafe Nine in New Haven. I understand Peter dedicated "Bums I Used to Know" to me a couple times as my friend Drew would call and hold up his cellphone for me to hear the show.

But they spoiled me over the years — they did give me some of my greatest musical thrills — so who am I to complain?

One was the one and only wedding they ever played, as far as I know — it'll be 20 years ago in August, for my old pals John and Mary Lawler in their former backyard in East Haven. The band was reluctant when John first approached them to play, probably having nightmares about having to play the Chicken Dance or "The Bride Cuts the Cake" or something. But no — John just wanted them to play what they always played. And the wedding turned out to be a better-dressed version of a night at the Grotto, not to mention a great reunion of friends and acquaintances who had started drifting away. And once the guys saw all those familiar faces, all was well, and they played two very fun sets.

The other was the night before my 33rd birthday in 1994, at Toad's Place in New Haven.

I was the *New Haven Register's* music writer at the time. Katherine Blossom, who booked the club back then, made her weekly call to me one Tuesday and said, "I think you're going to be happy with this one — I booked The Fleshtones for June 3rd." "Holy shit!" I told her. "That's the night before my birthday!" So as an early gift, she added The Reducers to the show and asked if there was a local band I wanted on the bill as well. I told her Gone Native, the rockabilly trio whose bass player, Paul "Nervus Chet" Mayer, now owns Cafe Nine. She booked the tripleheader, and Mike Spoerndle, the club's late founder, bought a half-dozen pizzas from Sally's to share with friends.

I had a shtick going with Gone Native at the time where I would come up on stage as their Cousin Loomis from Alabama and sing a couple songs with them. I did a handful of songs with them that night, and after that, Peter Detmold came up to me and asked if I wanted to sing "Let's Go" with The Reducers. Which I did. And after that, Peter Zarembo of The Fleshtones came to me and asked "So what are you gonna do with us?" We did "American Beat." I have a VHS in storage of this somewhere, which I've only played once, as proof.

And for a couple years after that, The Reducers would occasionally ask me to come up and sing "Let's Go" with them, including one New Year's Eve at the El'N'Gee. Talk about thrills.

I tell you — I was spoiled rotten.

And that's one of the things that's softened the blow of knowing I'll never see them again. I was one of the lucky ones who got to see them, and quite often, and got to know them on some level. The fans in Japan only got to see them the once, when they toured in 2004. And fans in the other parts of this country? Many not at all.

We saw them so much that, while death's always imminent, and even though Steve had been ill since last fall, none of their fans and friends, I'm assuming, prepared for the absolute finality of it.

There's now a finality. And the one regret was that they never got the recognition they deserve on a widespread scale. This is a Rock'N'Roll Hall of Fame-worthy band, commerce be damned. Thirty-four years with the same four guys and nothing but excellence? That has to count for something.

You won't be reading about Steve Kaika's passing in the pages of *Rolling Stone*. But that'll be just fine. The people who know and care and count will remember and perpetuate. Thanks, Steve, and Peter and Hugh and Tom, for all the enjoyment you gave us, be it on stage, on a turntable, or in a tape or CD deck in the car.