

# Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

## *(A history of his music and their romance)*

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### CHAPTER NINE

#### Santa Cruz and San Joaquin Valley

1980-1989

The three companions were caught up in a mood of reminiscence. Vi had a wonderful ability to recall her past. It was as if they were all right there experiencing it. She began telling them more about Dave.

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Dave felt like a pretty lucky guy when he thought back over the years. He had worked with most of the "greats" of the Country Western field, knowing that there aren't that many people who ever had that privilege. He said even though there were some headaches and some heartache along the way, he had memories of many good times and a lot of fun in his life. I think that while he was recuperating he started giving a lot more thought to what he had accomplished, and just what that meant to him While

Dave recovered, we spent more time at home. We'd go to shows, but he sat in the audience not on the stage. I knew he was just itching to get back to playing again, though. He'd say, "It's fun when I'm playin', and it ain't so fun when I'm not."

One of his favorite sayings was, "You know you can work with everybody, all the greats and not so greats, but if you don't have the public in front of you, then you don't have a reason to be playin'. We had the public supportin' us and for that I'm real thankful, because they make you what you are." For him, it didn't matter if he had a big audience or a small one. As long as he had that fiddle tucked under his chin and he could give his audience a tune that they could go out humming, he felt everything would be just fine.

Dave always had an uncanny ability for finding out "where the action was" when it came to his music. He heard that a place called O.T. Price's Music Hall was opening in Santa Cruz and that they needed a fiddle player. The place was near where we were house-sitting during the summer. When he went to audition, they hired him for Friday and Saturday nights. This was about the time the "urban cowboy" scene was going strong. The crowds were so big that people were waiting at the door for others to leave so they could get in. O.T.'s even had a mechanical bull to ride, but you can bet Dave never rode it!

We sold our place in the mountains after driving back and forth for a few months for house-sitting in Aptos or for Dave's fiddle playing at O.T.'s. I hated to leave since we had so many happy memories there, but we needed to go. We packed up and headed for the coast. Since Michael and Dawna had bought property and built their home in Corralitos, we were familiar with that area and knew it had a charm all its own. Since it was a quiet, somewhat secluded place in the country and just a few miles from the beach, it wasn't hard to make a decision to live there.

I'm so glad we did. On Thanksgiving of 1981, Dave had emergency surgery for an aneurysm on the aorta. He nearly died again. I gave him constant care. I thought of all the times he had cared for me and had pulled me through. This time besides me to dote on him, he had his little Bethany, too. We loved being close to Michael and Dawna's children, and this did help Dave to recover. He was on the bandstand again on New Year's Eve to sing a couple of songs with the *Joe Richie Band* at O.T. Price's.

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Vi picked up an envelope from the patio table and said, "I have a letter from our friend Anne Steinhardt who played fiddle in Joe's band. I'd like to read it to you. She sure knows how to paint a picture of what it was like then."

*"Back in the eighties when Country music was enjoying one of its periodic revivals, I was the fiddler in Joe Richie's Band at O.T. Price's Music Hall, Santa Cruz' Country music Mecca. Unlike many of the California faux cowboys I fiddled with, Joe was the real deal, Oklahoma born, Texas raised. The same respect that caused Merle Haggard to pay tribute to Bob Wills drew Joe to Dave Stogner, an elder statesman of the Western Swing style we all loved, and Dave sat in with us frequently. I can picture the lively scene at the popular night spot, the ever shifting social kaleidoscope, older couples two-stepping sedately, line dancers slapping leather, the beautiful people switching partners, beginning dancers hopping in confusion, the tables of girlfriends laughing and eyeing the young bachelors cutting like sharks through the crowd, everybody duded up in their cowboy best, smoke spiraling over the dance floor, and there is Dave, fiddle in hand, impeccably dressed in a country gentleman outfit, craggy handsome features, a humorous twinkle in his eye, a man at home in his skin and his profession, the fiddle so much a part of him it's like an extension of his arm, grinning his big broad ever present grin down at the swirling dancers."*

"Dave had such a good time while he performed there. Bethany, you can imagine how Anne and he sounded together." Vi continued to read.

*"Another scene comes to mind, Dave on a concert stage in the big auditorium at UC Santa Cruz. Young Jon Neher, one of Joe's pedal steel players, was getting his degree in music at the University, and*

*he'd invited Dave and myself to take part in his senior recital. Dave, with his natural grace, was at home in the groves of academe as he was in the honky tonks. At the recital, we were playing twin fiddles on some Bob Wills' classic like 'Rose of San Antone'. In those days I tended to play as if I were being paid by the note, and just as my flashy lead swooped in flurries of 16th notes to a climax, Dave, with that twinkle in his eye, drowned me out with a simple, well-placed lick. It reminded me of those barnyard jokes where the old rooster always manages to outsmart his younger, friskier replacement."*

"That's such a perfect description of Papa!" The letter delighted Bethany.

"Dave performed just about anywhere he was asked. Remember when he'd go to school with you to play for your class? You stayed at our house every Wednesday when you started school."

"I will always treasure those memories," replied Bethany.

"Marie, you should have seen those kids together with Dave. Lucas was Papa's boy! When they would stop by the house to see us, he'd run right pass me and jump into Dave's arms. Dave adored him." Vi smiled from the memory and went on to relate her story.

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Dave started as a DJ on KOCN radio out of Pacific Grove. Then, he also got on Santa Cruz's KUSP as a DJ. These were two-hour shows. Sometimes, he'd interview guest musicians who were playing in the area. He advertised the places where he'd be performing, also. He never needed a script since he knew so much about the music and how to entertain listeners. He did travel back to the Valley once in a while to play with Leon Carter at Uncle Tom's Tavern. He said he just liked to stay in touch with it all.

In June of 1984, Fresno had its first Country Music Jubilee at the Hacienda Convention Center. The purpose of it was to reunite members of some vintage Valley-based bands that had played throughout the San Joaquin Valley over the years. Dave, of course, got *The Western Rhythmaires* together for that occasion. I think that all but one of his band members joined him for it. At least four of Bob Wills' Texas Playboys were there sitting in with Joe Holley's band. Joe also had Ken Cannon sitting in on trombone, and Bill Woods made a guest appearance with them to sing some songs he had recorded on Capitol Records. Elwin Cross was featured. He had performed in the area for over forty years. The Jubilee was sponsored by Fresno's Olde-Tyme Country and Western Swing Music Association.

The people enjoyed hearing Dave and his band again, but probably not nearly as much as he enjoyed playing for them. He saw more familiar faces than he had seen in any one place in a long time. Several people came up to talk to him after the show to recall memories of being in audiences at his dances. Being so fondly

remembered after all the years that had come and gone, made Dave realize that he must have made a contribution to some happy memories somewhere along the road.

About this same time, Dave had become a friend with Bob Mitchell, the program director at KFRE and KFRY-FM radio. Bob told Dave that he felt a responsibility to assist in the preservation of the music and history of Country musicians in the Valley. He said Dave's friendship had given him a link to some of the people in Country music's history, and that he thrived on their relationship and its input to his programming knowledge. I'm sure Dave entertained him with some good stories! He and Bob even gave some serious thought to the possibility of opening The Barn again, however the current owners didn't share their enthusiasm.

Dave got his Fresno band together one more time for a Dave Stogner and *The Western Rhythmaires* reunion dance in Fresno at the Hacienda Inn. Not long after that we had a barbecue for them at our house in Corralitos. Now there was a group who would never run out of stories!

Dave always liked to tease them about one time in particular. It was a night when they were traveling to Merced to do a dance. They hadn't brought playing cards. Dave was driving, so he stopped at a bus station in Chowchilla so one of them could go inside to get a deck. As they started dealing out the cards and playing, Dave could see through the rear view mirror that money was going into the middle of the table like mad. He said it was more money than he had ever seen them bet. He looked at the hands he could see through the mirror. There was one hand with four aces and one with four kings. As each one showed their hand, they each thought they had won the pot. There was nothing but good hands. Dave asked them if they were sure they had a poker deck. They looked on the box, and sure enough they had a pinochle deck! They always had a big laugh over that incident.

Dave had decided to put together another band with local musicians from around Santa Cruz. He also called this band *The Western Rhythmaires*, but it wasn't a Western Swing band. They played all the jobs they could, even some private parties. It was at one of these parties that we met Judy Malmin. When he began telling her his experiences he was so modest, I knew he'd probably say more good things about other musicians than about himself.

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Vi turned to her granddaughter as she said, "You saw that when you read his manuscript."

"Oh, yes! He should have been so proud of himself. I think he more than accomplished his music dreams, and he helped others along the way, as well. And then, there is your love story! It's quite something! You've filled in a lot of the "between the lines" and I think this makes his story so much more complete. Your love has passed on into two more generations, already. Your four sons feel it, and

so do their families." Bethany smiled as she watched her grandmother reach for the tissue box.

"Honey, you make me have tears. Thank you so much for being so understanding." Vi took a moment and then continued recalling her past.

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Dave and Judy worked on his book as often as they could. Neither one of them had a lot of time to put into their project. It was about that same time that Dan was going through a divorce. He got a job transfer and moved to Salinas. He was so lonesome, though, that Dave invited him to come and stay with us. Sometimes, he'd go with us to Dave's shows and help carry the equipment. When people asked him if he was in the band, he'd say, "No, I'm just the roadie!" He liked being Dave's roadie. They were constantly kidding each other.

We liked having him at the house with us. It was helpful to have him look after the place if we had to go away, too. One time, KOCN gave Dave some complimentary tickets to stay in a hotel in Monterey. We told Dan we'd be staying for two days and nights. We had a beautiful room with a fireplace. The first day, we walked around together doing some sightseeing. We ate dinner at a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf and enjoyed watching the sea otters playing in the surf. The next day, we went shopping and took in more of Monterey's historic sights. We were relaxing in our room that evening, when Dave decided he wanted to go home. He said he wanted a "fridge" he could get into when he got hungry! I tried to convince him to stay until morning, but he wanted to go then.

We got home close to midnight. We didn't think to knock, we just walked in. We kind of scared Dan. I think he was looking for a weapon because he thought we were burglars. After that, we always called out "Hello, Dan!" anytime we came home and he was there.

After the doctor told us that fiddle playing had helped strengthen Dave's heart and that it was fine, we had the opportunity to travel to Hawaii. We were ready for a getaway. Feb. 18th, 1985, we boarded the plane and flew out of San Francisco International Airport on our way to Honolulu. Michael, Dawna, and the children were in Lanikai, at that time. They had a small apartment at the rear of their house where we stayed. They also had a car for us to use while we were there. Dave didn't leave the music scene behind, though. His good friend, Little Jimmy Dickens, was performing at the Wheeler Air Force Base on the island of Oahu. Dave sat in with him and did some fiddle playing. We took photos of the two of them together, with Dave fiddling and Jimmy on guitar. Dave had a great time. Jimmy's wife, Mona, was with him, so after the show the four of us went to another club where we sat and talked for a while. It was a lot of fun.

Dave and I were having a wonderful and romantic trip. We celebrated my birthday at the Mid-Pacific Country Club and we also visited a lot of the tourist sites. We were staying only two blocks from a very beautiful beach. We'd pack up our beach

chairs, beach towels, camera, and of course two wineglasses and a bottle of wine, then off we'd go to the beach to spend the afternoon. In the evening, we'd sit together and watch the sunset.

The time eventually came for us to think about going home. Dave couldn't find much Country Western music there, so he started getting antsy to get back to performing. We couldn't go home, though, because the airline went on strike and the others wouldn't accept our tickets to return home. So, we stayed there for one month. We had fun spending time with the children, however we were both glad when we finally did get home.

The next year we drove back through the desert to El Centro to spend some time with Daryl, Sharon, and their children, Ashley and Sean. Their son, Seth, wasn't born until 1996. We went through Palm Springs. The desert was just beautiful. I had never seen dates growing on trees. We passed through the Salton Sea.

While Dave was driving, he got to talking about Nashville. He was thinking that if he had been asked a third time to go to be a part of The Grand Ol' Opry, he just might have said yes. He missed the Opry folks. Then, he recalled his and the band members' decision not to move to Nashville. One of the reasons was that they didn't want to leave California to be traveling the country.

When they had gone to Nashville, it rained the entire time they were there. When they left Tennessee, they drove across Arkansas during the night and it was flooding. To Dave a flood was more dangerous than a tornado. He thought at least a person could see a tornado coming, but when it rained and then it rained harder a flash flood could come upon you before you knew it. Dave always said he knew that country as well as it knew itself.

He said that night there was already about three inches of water on the highway. He told the driver not to let any grass grow under his feet because it wasn't going to get any better. There was loud thunder and lightning was hitting the road, so they couldn't even nap. In a place called Searcy, they pulled into a little service station and parked under a canopy for about an hour.

It continued to rain on them until they reached Oklahoma. They drove on to Warner, and that's where the car gave out on them. Dave said some ol' boy put in a new set of spark plugs, a new distributor, and a few other things. He thought it would cost at least \$60. When the guy said \$16, they paid him quick and got out of there before he could change his mind!

I reminded him of how happy he had been to get back to California after that trip. I remembered that he had called me the next day. Then one morning a few days later, he had come by the house and over coffee he told me what he had decided. He had said it just wasn't for him, it was too far away, and that he had missed me. As we drove along, I teased him about missing me being the main reason he had chosen not to go to Nashville.

Dave and I arrived at Daryl's place in the afternoon. It was so good to see all of them. While we were there, they took us down into old Mexico through Mexicali. Dave had Sharon do some bargaining for him for a pair of boots. We loved being with Ashley and Sean. We didn't get to spend a lot of time with all of our grandchildren. They still all meant the same to us, though. Dave was so proud of them all.

In 1986, we were still traveling to Fresno occasionally so Dave could perform with Leon at Uncle Tom's. One night when we were there, he had just set up to play when he began to have pain in his chest and arm. I rushed him off to St. Agnes Hospital. He ended up back with Dr. Owens for triple-bypass surgery.

This required us to leave Corralitos and move back to the Valley to be where his doctors were. Dan had remarried. He and his wife, Karla, were living in Madera then. We moved in with them, until Dave was well enough for us to find a house. Dan and I moved everything from the Corralitos house and stored it in their garage. This time Dave's recovery was slower. When he was feeling better we found a house to rent, but it took us a while to get settled.

There was an acre and a half for sale right across the street from Dan's house. We started talking about it, and decided we'd buy it and build a house there. We had time to just sit and talk. We worked out the plans and then we changed the plans. We picked out paint colors, carpet and appliances. When the new house was under construction, it gave us something to keep our minds on while Dave wasn't able to perform.

He liked to sit and play his guitar in the afternoons. Sometimes, he'd make up a tune or write song lyrics. He'd call me away from whatever I was doing to sit down and listen. I'd sit and he'd play his tune or sing his song for me. Then, he'd ask, "What do you think of that?" Mostly, what I'd be thinking was just how much I loved him.

It was in October of 1988 when he was diagnosed with lung cancer. This was shocking beyond words. For a short time he was still able to get around and we could go out together. On New Year's Eve, we went to a dinner dance with three other couples. I knew in my heart that it would be the last. At midnight we danced to the song, *The Waltz You Saved For Me*. Dave told me to always think of him on New Year's Eve. He didn't like to see me cry, but sometimes I did. This time the gripping ache in my heart would stay for a long time.

I became his full-time caregiver. I drove him to radiation treatments everyday. He was getting very thin. I tried everything to get him to eat. I'd put little umbrellas on his food or cook special things he thought he wanted. I'd lie beside him on the bed, and try to keep him cheered up. I didn't want to leave him alone with all that suffering.

I promised him I'd never stop pushing his name and trying to keep Western Swing alive. I told him over and over how much I loved him. Years before he had told

me, "Someday you'll know how much I love you." He said this again and I told him I knew, I really knew.

I was worn out and I was very angry at the world; at his doctors, nurses, the radiation center, and anybody else I could think of. I had lost the battle to save him, and they couldn't help his suffering. He'd ask me things like what he had done to deserve this. What could I say? That was so hard to take.

He kept telling me what to do when he was gone. He'd talk about everything. He'd ask me what I was going to do with things like his silver-colored jacket. I had made it for him to wear when he went out to perform. I had embroidered lettering on the back- Dave Stogner and *The Western Rhythmaires*. He just loved that jacket. I told him I thought David should have it. He agreed. He'd talk about the new house, too. It was only two-thirds done. He wished that he could live long enough to move into it with me. He told me he didn't mind going, but he hated to leave me alone.

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"I know this sounds so sad. In a way, though, it's helpful to be able to talk about it. And, I haven't been alone. When I go to bed at night, I listen to cassette tapes of Dave performing and he sings me to sleep. Almost every night he comes to see me in my dreams. He's usually young and still playing his fiddle. I go with him and listen to him play. Sometimes, we go walking on the beach and sit and listen to the waves come ashore, or we watch a beautiful sunset. Sometimes we are back in the mountains with our dogs. I hate to wake up, but sometimes I can go back to sleep and return to the same dream. He's still as handsome, sweet, and loving in my dreams as he was in life. It's like one of my favorite songs that he sang so many times, *I Dreamed of an Old Love Affair*."

*Just like old times you were here last night/And gone were the  
worries and cares/But when I awoke I knew then that I had dreamed  
of an old love affair/My life's been so empty without you, sweetheart/  
Many dreams ago you left me here/Sunlight told me you were gone  
and I had dreamed of an old love affair/My life's been so empty since  
you have gone/I loved you with all of my heart/Heaven was mine  
when you smiled last night and said we would make a new start....*

Vi was the only one who didn't have tears rolling down her cheeks at this moment. She was even smiling. People had thought she had said her final good-bye back in 1989, but she knew differently.

Bethany reached out for her grandmother's hand. "I am a little lost for words, Nana. I would like to know, though, what made you want to tell me about you and Papa now?"

"Your wedding, sweetie! Seeing you experiencing such a great belief in the love that you and Jeff share and promising your lives to one another made me realize



that I had wanted you and the family to know all about your Papa and me. I knew that you could understand because you were feeling the kind of love that Dave and I felt for each other. You and Jeff are so devoted to making each other's life happy and fulfilled. This is how a marriage should be, and we had that kind of relationship in our marriage, too. Your Papa's and my love was true just like Jeff's and yours."