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Songwriter was a key in '70s folk boom

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BY [DAVE HOEKSTRA](#) Staff Reporter

Chicago singer-songwriter Tom Dundee performed from a tender songbook that was defined by his composition "A Delicate Balance." Mr. Dundee died Tuesday at St. Francis Hospital in Evanston from injuries suffered Saturday when he crashed his motorcycle into a pole on Chicago's Far North Side. He was 59.

At the time of his death, Mr. Dundee was a linchpin of the 1970s Chicago folk boom that produced John Prine, Steve Goodman, Bonnie Koloc and Jim Post, who covered "A Delicate Balance." Since 2001, Mr. Dundee hosted "Somebody Else's Troubles Sundays" reunion sets at Lilly's, 2515 N. Lincoln, across the street from the former Somebody Else's Troubles nightclub that was owned in the mid-1970s by Goodman, Earl Pionke and others.

On April 2, Mr. Dundee shared his last "Somebody Else's Troubles Sundays" show with singer-songwriter James Lee Stanley at Lilly's. Former Monkee Peter Tork was in town and sat in with Stanley and Mr. Dundee. Club owner Lilly Von Hodowanic-Romanoff had been a waitress at the Earl of Old Town nightclub on North Wells. Mr. Dundee embraced this ironic sense of community.

A DELICATE BALANCE (EXCERPT)

By Tom Dundee

Deep within there is a vision
That time is nothing but space
And between every minute and mile that is in it
Somehow there is a beautiful face

I dreamed I was barer than naked
And it scared me so bad that I called
"Help me back to the prison, with the chains of the living"
Although nothing had hurt me at all

And it's all such a delicate balance
Takes away just as much as it gives
To live it is real, to love it is to feel
You're a part of what everything is

He was a running partner of late singer-songwriter Mike Jordan, and he was no stranger to the playful nature of folks like the Somebody Else's Troubles chef who posted the hand-scrawled warning: "Only a fool argues with a skunk, a mule or a cook."

That made Mr. Dundee smile.

According to Mr. Dundee's girlfriend Roni Perkins, a hospital visitor brought along a copy of a picture of Mr. Dundee standing next to the sign. The picture was taken by Chicago singer-songwriter Art Thieme during a benefit show at Somebody Else's Troubles.

When singer-songwriter Chris Farrell moved to Chicago in 1975 from Pennsylvania, Mr. Dundee was one of the first artists he heard about. "Everybody was out every night," Farrell recalled Wednesday. "At the end of the night, everybody would converge at the Earl of Old Town because that was open late. I kept hearing about Tom Dundee. There was even a song of his printed in the Come For To Sing magazine. Of course, Tom was out of town at the time."

'The mood was relaxed'

That was a characteristic of Mr. Dundee. He was an itinerant singer-songwriter with the reporter's eye and sympathetic heart of Cisco Houston and Woody Guthrie. Even at the time of his death, Mr. Dundee divided time between Chicago and northern California, where he made a living as a carpenter and also performed in nightclubs.

Former John Prine drummer Angelo Varias recorded with Mr. Dundee. Around 1980, Mr. Dundee hired Prine's rhythm section (Tom Piekarski on bass, John Burns on guitar and Varias) to play on several independent tracks. "He reminded me of [East Coast singer-songwriter] Tom Rush," Varias said. "When he played, the mood was relaxed. He was always traveling; he was an 'everyman' who sang music."

Mr. Dundee was a devout Steve Goodman fan. Like Goodman, Mr. Dundee made every word count. There are many Goodman songs to sing, but Dundee liked performing "Would You Like To Learn To Dance?" He asked questions and took chances. He was a romantic.

Farrell added, "A lot of us came from other places. Mike Jordan came from St. Louis. Harry Waller came from Pittsburgh. But Tom was a Chicagoan. He knew a lot of the stuff firsthand that we didn't see. We thought he should be there with Prine and Goodman, and we heard how 'this guy' or 'that guy' was looking at Tom's songs. It never broke that way for Tom."

Norm "Mad Dog" Siegel played bass with the late Fred Holstein for five years. On New Year's Eve, 2004, Diane, his wife of nearly 19 years, died suddenly. "At the visitation, one of my friends leaned over my shoulder and said, 'There's a man hovering over you, and he looks like a real hobo,'" Siegel recalled Wednesday from his home in Elgin. "Well, Tom was wearing his uniform: jean jacket and flannel shirt. He drove 40 miles from the city in a snowstorm. He put his arm around me, and before he left he said, 'I'm doing a concert on Jan. 8. If you don't come, it's not going to be good for you.' So I went. And a week or so after that, I took out my guitar and started to play again. He inspired me to work again."

Farrell said, "Tom's songs had a lot of heart, a lot of depth. 'A Delicate Balance' was a grand look at life and how everybody fits in their place in the universe. There's another song called 'McBride Argyle Station: Furnished Rooms,' a wordy title, but it flows."

An Uptown flophouse

On the surface, the song with the five-story title was about an old guy living alone in an Uptown flophouse, but Mr. Dundee challenged the listener to look deeper. The song appears on "Live at Charlotte's Web," recorded nearly 30 years ago in Rockford. "I still get choked up at the last line," Farrell said. Then by memory he recited Mr. Dundee's final line, "... Don't cut him off like a weed grown wild/He's a diamond, he's the savior's child/He's the same as me and you/Except for all the lovin' we've been through."

Mr. Dundee, an organ donor, lived in Rogers Park. He is survived by several cousins.

A memorial tribute will be at 5 p.m. May 14 at the Old Town School of Folk Music, 4544 N. Lincoln Ave.

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