

Too Many Stars: A Conversation with the Organizers

In advance of the Too Many Stars Mark Cutler Benefit at The Met in Pawtucket on January 19 & 20, I interviewed the organizers, Richard Ribb, Emerson Torrey, Rick Couto, Scott Doggett and Tommy Piche, via e-mail about the event. They responded as a group. Marilyn Keller of the BickerSins, who is also involved, added her thoughts as well.

John Fuzek: Why the event?

The primary purpose of the event is to raise funds that can help support Mark and his family as he goes through treatment and recovery for cancer in his throat. Recovery from serious illness can take time. For Mark, that means he will be unable or limited in his ability to earn income for an undetermined amount of time.

An additional purpose of the event is to recognize Mark's contribution to music and to people here in southern New England. He has inspired players and songwriters and personally helped people become better musicians. His work to help developmentally challenged people express themselves through songwriting shows his commitment to creating a better world. And he has collected donated food for community food banks at his shows for years.

There are many music fans in Rhode Island and elsewhere that have been listening to Mark's songs for many years. They have followed Mark through his various bands and have grown into a substantial fan base. These fans often can be seen singing along to every song at his performances. His songs have a timeless quality and express ideas about love, life and rock n' roll that resonate with people. Many of his fans have said that Cutler songs have been an important part of the soundtrack to their lives as they were growing up.

This particular event presents Mark's songs in a unique format: Over 60 of his original songs will be performed by more than 20 bands/acts drawn from across the area's most accomplished musicians. Each act will perform three of Mark's songs, putting their own stamp on some of Mark's best-loved songs.

JF: What exactly is wrong with Mark?

Mark has been diagnosed with throat cancer (though it does not involve his vocal chords)

JF: What is his prognosis?

He was told by his doctors that, after his treatment, his prognosis is very good.

JF: How long does he expect to be out from performing?

We don't expect that Mark will be back to performing until late March or April. But that depends on his recovery progress.

JF: Who had the idea for the benefit?

The idea of a benefit was being tossed around by all of us, but the catalyst was when Tommy Piche asked Emerson Torrey if any fundraising effort was being planned. Emerson told Tommy that we should make it happen and told him that our production group called Positive Noise could help put things together. (Last spring and summer Positive Noise produced some concerts to support hurricane relief victims.)

JF: What is your relationship with Mark? How long have you known him?

Emerson Torrey: I starting working with Mark back in 1978 when we started the Schemers. I have worked with Mark on and off for 40 plus years. We also worked together in the Raindogs and some musical projects after that. I later joined the band the Dino Club which produced two CDs. And I have also worked with Mark recording some of his solo records including Red and Sweet Pain.

Rick Couto: I played on a number of Mark's recordings and in 2010, I joined Mark's current band, the Men of Great Courage. That led to me be asked to officially join the Schemers.

Scott Doggett/Richard Ribb: [We] have known Mark since the early 1980s and often shared stages with him when both our bands (Kid El Deen and the Shake) were regulars at local clubs (eg, Lupos, Last Call Saloon, the Living Room, etc.). Richard occasionally fills in on bass/vocals in the Men of Great Courage.

JF: How many acts are performing?

We will have a minimum of 22 acts performing over two days at The Met in Pawtucket. The event takes place on Saturday, January 19 from 7pm to closing, and on Sunday, January 20 from 4 to 9pm.

JF: How were the acts chosen for the benefit?

Positive Noise (Emerson Torrey, Richard Ribb, Scott Doggett, and Rick Couto) got together with Tom Piche and Marilyn Keller to brainstorm which bands had some kind of connection to Mark and who we thought might be available. Nearly all of the acts/musicians we contacted enthusiastically volunteered to play. We would have loved to accommodate all the acts that asked to join, but there just wasn't enough space in the event schedule for all those folks to participate.

JF: What is the format of the show?

We decided that the show should be about honoring Mark's songwriting talent and we thought the best way to do that would be to ask the bands involved to play Mark's songs. In order to accommodate all the bands that will be involved we placed a limit on each act of three songs.

JF: How much do you expect to raise?

The money raised is certainly going to help Mark meet his living and medical costs, but we think these concerts also represent a way for many musicians and the people who attend to honor the man and pay homage to his many years of creating the music of our lives.

JF: Is there an emcee?

At this time Bill Flanagan, long-time rock music writer and author, who is an old friend of us all, thinks he will be able to entertain us on one of the nights. We are working on securing an emcee for the

second show.

JF: Is The Met contributing to the cost of the show?

The Met is providing the venue, assisting with ticket sales and security and helping in other ways to make sure we have well-run, successful shows on both days. Rich and Sarah Lupo have long supported all the bands that Mark has fronted and are a huge part of the local and national music scene. Regarding donations from businesses, to date we have received donations from Empire Guitar (donated a new guitar to raffle off), Noll Guitar, Village Drum Shop, and we anticipate more.

JF: Anything that you would like to add?

Just that we hope everyone who loves Mark and his music and who supports live music will turn out and help make this a fun and successful musical event.

Marilyn Keller of the BickerSins: I have known Mark Cutler since the late 1970s from playing at the same venues; presently I play in a band, The BickerSins. When I joined The Same Thing Project (with Mark Cutler) initially I thought it was just a songwriters project, then to my surprised realized that it was so much better.

The Same Thing Project is a free songwriting program for people from every walk of life, including anyone who may have developmental challenges or disabilities or just have a love of music. This program has been nothing short of an eye-opener. To be able to walk into a room of strangers and with a little bit of magic, the creative workings of ideas contributed, form into a wondrous piece of music. You can't help walking out inspired with a sense of satisfaction and making new friendships.

When I found out that Mark was on the battlefield of cancer and still running this project, it occurred to me that this man gives and gives and gives, never asking for anything. Truly he is a man of great courage and has only inspired all of us to get together with fellow musicians to show this man how much he is appreciated. Hence, Too Many Stars Benefit featuring Mark Cutler's tunes.

All of us who are involved in this event feel this is the best way for Mark to see how grateful we are to have him in our life and will do anything possible for him to continue writing, playing and fulfilling his dreams. Thanks to Mark we get the chance to pay it forward.

For more about the show, go to themetri.com