

Sioux Falls Sage Of The Skins

by Doane Perry

We don't get many in this life. Genuine, true friends, in the deepest, rarest sense. Mark Craney and I shared a rich, colorful history together, which began in 1976 and crossed all borders of common interest.

Some of the closest friendships that I share today are directly because of Mark introducing me to so many people that I might otherwise have never known. He was the vector that we all intersected with and a major thread of continuity through so many of our lives. Mark had many "best" friends, and I feel honored to have been among them.

It is nearly impossible to encapsulate in a few paragraphs the enormous life Mark had. I can only offer some treasured moments from our own shared past.

One day Mark was over at our house, and we were sitting around in my office, talking. He knew I loved to read, and at one point he got up and walked over to my library wall and silently perused through the titles. He turned around and asked, "You read all these books?" "Pretty much, I guess," I replied. He sat himself back down again and was silent for a moment, then turned to me with one eyebrow arched upwards, saying, "You *really* ought to be a lot smarter."

Well, Mark was innately smarter, more intuitive, and wiser than almost anyone I ever knew, in music and in life. This did not come from books but from that much deeper, inner source to which Mark always seemed to have access. Maybe it was from growing up in the large, silent spaces of the Midwest. He had a great sense of humor and a dry, wicked wit that was counterbalanced by the soul of an artist, a philosopher, and a country farmer. Deeply connected to nature, animals, and people, and possessing a powerful, empathetic spirit despite a body that eventually had trouble keeping pace, his reflective, searching, and philosophical nature remained unbowed.



Great Friends:
Doane and Mark

The Drum Club

Mark was undisputedly the president of the Woodland Hills Drum Club. It is not a zip code. We have no membership cards or billable dues. It is a brotherhood of hundreds of drummers and friends from around the globe, although we've grudgingly allowed in a few other instrumentalists along the way for general harmonic support. It's a non-discriminatory, non-denominational, ecumenical society of drummers, which all began in Mark's garage in 1985.

Mancini's Club in Canoga Park, California often hosted the Woodland Hills Drum Club Night in LA, which Mark led, and they were always an event. We would customarily have two to three drumkits set up and have different combinations of some of the best players in LA turn up to play together. That was a really fun, informal gig where we could all go and blow out the fluorocarbons.

It seemed as if at one time or another, every great player that we knew locally, or who was in town visiting, came and sat in.

And every night Mark threw down the gauntlet. Sometimes it was a little scary, but always fun and often an "E" ticket ride with player after player egging each other on. Tony Williams showed up one night and sat in the front row. I can tell you, that put the fear of God into just about everyone *except* Mark.

Mark was always the heart and soul of it, and he commanded the vessel like a fearless sea captain, keeping things in check and moving everyone forward. One notable exception occurred, however, at the end of an evening when two fairly over-refreshed participants got up for the last drum trio performance of the night with Mark, who, as always, was in the center position. During the middle of the song, a short trading of fours amongst the drummers was supposed to take place, but it quickly degenerated into a drum bloodbath between the other two drummers. Mark had a very low tolerance for that sort of nonsense. He finally just stopped playing, crossed his arms, and gave each of the duelists a withering,

"Are you quite finished now?" look, which somehow cut through the haze of their considerable inebriation and shocked them back into momentary sobriety, whereupon he counted the rest of the band back in and finished the song with the two offending knuckleheads towing the line.

At one point during the 1980s Mark had decided to move back to his hometown of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. On my way back from New York enroute to Los Angeles, he invited me to come visit him in his new pad. And so I did. And what a pad! Huge, open, bright, three stories, overlooking the beautiful, sprawling plains of South Dakota. A quiet, bucolic paradise with the drum room every drummer dreams about, which resided on the bottom floor. Picture this: one room the length of the entire house and nearly as deep,

Inner Reserves

Over the years Mark endured many physical indignities and insults to his body from diabetes, two kidney transplants, small strokes, surgeries, dialysis, and a myriad of associated ailments. Yet he remained a powerful, living example of overcoming adversity, which was a demonstration of his enormous inner strength. Mark faced obstacle after setback and yet continued to rebound, astonishing all of us—and occasionally himself too. It was interesting that when he was in some of these terrible physical states, probably halfway out of his body, there were still faculties that remained fully functioning and cognizant, though on a very different level.

Unfortunately, in late August, 2005 he suffered a debilitating stroke, which left him unable to eat or speak. A major

that I really wanted to play Mark some music during our visits, some of *his* music. So I brought down my iPod and two sets of my good Bose headphones and said, "Mark, you *have* to listen to this." He had no idea what I was going to play for him, and the first thing up was the live version of "Brother To Brother" from his solo CD, *Something With A Pulse*, which Gino Vannelli had generously donated. In fact, every single artist who appeared on that CD donated their tracks, some of which Mark appeared on, and others that were donated from people who simply admired his work and wished to help him. As soon as "Brother To Brother" started, his face just lit up. After some particularly wicked and perplexing fill, a big smile crossed his face and he looked at me, whereupon we both cracked up in delight. He held up five fingers, silently mouthing, "Those were

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with two enormous double bass drumsets side by side in mirror image of one another. Don't forget, Mark was a southpaw, so he sat on the left side and the right-handed kit sat on the right. Flanking the outside on the far right was his little jazz kit, and flanking the far left side was his small funk kit. I lost track of the hours we spent in that room playing and playing. But the best part of the room was the view. All the drumsets faced a floor-to-ceiling wall of double glazed windows that overlooked fields of wheat, which gently swayed back and forth to the muted thunder. Every field mouse within a hundred miles probably moved to *North Dakota*. (Oh, woe be to us poor misunderstood drummers.)

After the ritualistic purging, we would then go off for a drive over the plains or a long walk in the fields followed by some organic tea. It was heaven.

improvement did occur when they were finally able to provide Mark with a trach tube, which allowed him to talk again—a bit haltingly, but nonetheless, understandable. This was a huge step forward and a great boost to his spirits—and ours too. We could have a conversation again! How much all of us had missed that, and we made the most of the opportunity.

At various times, all of his friends and family had asked Mark if they could bring down something to the hospital to provide some diversionary activity. He didn't really enjoy TV...small wonder, probably too many food commercials anyway, which were a painful reminder of all that he was missing. He declined CD players, radios, iPods. Eventually he showed some interest in board games. They engaged his mind and were interactive.

During his last six weeks, I had decided

fives," during another blistering break. I think it made him feel really good to hear that and relive some of those wonderful, magical musical highlights. After that stunning display with Gino, he said, "So, what's next?"

It was one of my all-time favorite performances of his, "Black Sunday," with Jethro Tull, live at the LA Sports Arena. I was so happy he was enjoying music again, especially some of his own musical contributions. And on it went. Track after track. At the end of all the music and the talking I looked at the clock, shocked to see that it was 1:30 in the morning. I was amazed that the staff hadn't kicked me out. I think they, too, realized that Mark was having a great time, and simply pretended I wasn't there.

I said to him, "You must be tired, I should let you go to sleep." He replied,



"No, I'm really enjoying myself, I'll let you know." So we talked until about 2:00 A.M., and then I gave in. He wore *me* out that night!

Mark's keen powers of observation never left him, even when one thought he probably was not taking notice. He was always showing interest and concern for each one of us, particularly if he sensed something different, reading the subtle, nearly imperceptible changes in his friends. Perhaps his condition made him more finely attuned to the subtleties of changes within each of us, giving him an ability to "read" his friends in a more finely detailed way. But he was quite a tough guy, and despite—or perhaps *because* of—his handicaps and disabilities, he lived a richly textured interior life, of which we were all lucky recipients. At times stoic, even ascetic, he was always available, warm, and understanding of his friends and family.

We talked about death and dying on many occasions over the years. I know he wasn't afraid of death, but this time he knew things were quite different—we all did—and the real proximity of it was tangible in a way in which it never had been in our abstract, objective previous discussions. Now it had become a very subjective point of view for him, and for the first time was a little scary. There was still so much he wanted to experience. However, he openly expressed his doubt as to whether he would be able to make the long journey of recovery back to what he jokingly referred to as his "full thirty percent."

And The Music

Mark was a stunning player. A natural. A giant of his instrument, gifted with an extraordinary musical imagination that left me many times just simply shaking my head. How did he *do* that? Always sensitive to the music. Capable of great dynamics, subtle shadings, ditch-digging, or wonderfully complex grooves and jaw-dropping breaks.

Those beautifully angular, abstract fills, and such an unbelievably good sense of time, note placement, and phrasing—all the elements that gave Mark his uniquely identifiable sonic identity. That effortless fluidity and deeply rooted musicality provided him with the ability to play in any musical setting and yet still leave that immediately recognizable stamp. That was *him*.

A wonderful moment that occurred in 1979 on Gino Vannelli's *Brother To Brother* tour is a pretty good illustration of Mark's relaxed approach to everything. This is the point where Mark and I really began to be great friends. At the time I was playing with Phyllis Hyman, who was an extraordinary R&B jazz singer. We were the opening act on the tour.

We were playing at the Omni in Atlanta one night, and I happened to be in the Vannelli band's dressing room shortly before show time. Mark was stretched out on one of those hard wooden benches that are the standard dressing room decor of most American sports arenas. Eyes closed, possibly asleep, while all around him peo-

ple were tuning up, laughing, talking, practicing, all preparing to go on stage and play this very demanding music. The road manager walks in and announces, "Five minutes." Mark slowly opened his eyes, sat up, stretched (once!), casually walked on stage before a loud, excited audience of 15,000 people, and played like a fire-breathing dragon. I just could not even *comprehend* how he could possibly do something like that.

Mark was, quite simply, amazing. He was like a dancer on the drums. Relaxed, fluid, powerful, dynamic, and possessing incredible technique, he punctuated the music while seeming to freely improvise between all the complexities of the arrangements. Effortlessly driving the large ensemble like a Ferrari, Mark was a phenomenon to watch and hear.

Since joining Jethro Tull in 1984, I've had innumerable people ask about Mark. Many knew that he had experienced some serious health problems and just wanted to see how he was faring and to pass along their best wishes. He was so loved and respected, and made a huge impression on people with his brilliant playing. I wish they had the good fortune to have known him—though, of course, in a way they all did.

In his very quiet and understated way, Mark was tremendously proud of his association with the Jethro Tull family. When I would speak to him from the road, he would often conclude the conversation by saying, "Give my love to the lads."

Mark always felt a deep connection with the band, turning up whenever we played locally and *really* appreciating the music, as only someone who has had the unique perspective of experiencing it from the inside can have.

He had the heart of a lion: strong, proud, dignified, and fiercely loyal. His business card read "Mark Craney—Drums—No excuses." I thought that was brilliant, succinct, and very Zen. Quite a bit like him.

So long for now, old friend.

If you would like read more about Mark Craney, go to www.jtull.com/news/markcraneydpobit.cfm. For information about Mark's CD, Mark Craney & Friends—Something With A Pulse, go to www.artist-shop.com.

