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Opinion Exchange

Commentaries are selected to present a range of perspectives and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Star Tribune Editorial Board.

REMEMBERING

How Tony Glover and I bonded over words

We had a quiet friendship around music and books.

By CHARLIE MAGUIRE

Tony Glover's last gig was Saturday, Oct. 20, 2018, in the Dunsmore Room at Crooners in Minneapolis. It was a sold-out concert devoted to Woody Guthrie (whom Tony knew) and ended with a hooting standing ovation.

Afterward came the CD sales and autographs. A nice fat paycheck had been promptly delivered before the evening had even started. For a blues harmonica player "into blowing and sucking," as Tony once wrote, it just doesn't get any better than that.

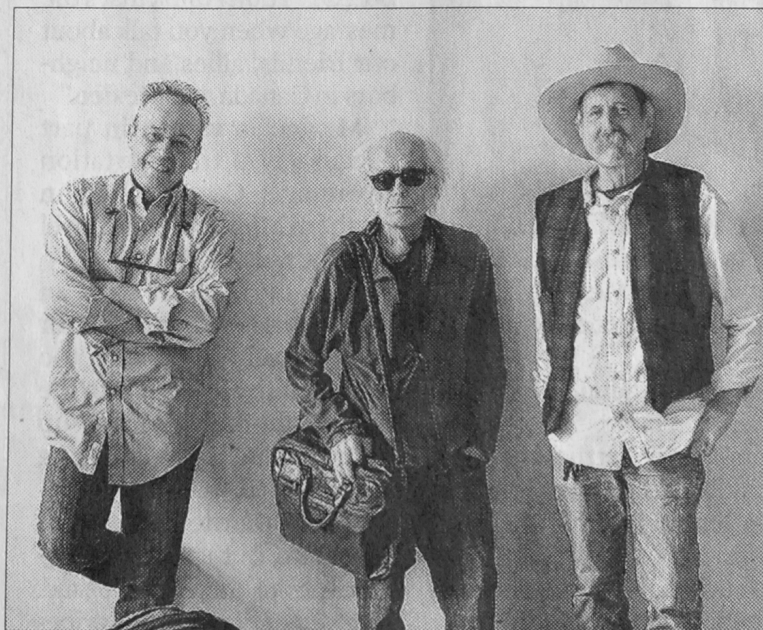
Tony went out on top that night, and quietly asked Pop Wagner and myself — the other two-thirds of the act — not to talk to anybody about his decision. (He was having trouble breathing, and had mostly decided that he was not playing up to the levels he set for himself.)

Then with an always-hip "Later," he stepped off the stage for what was to be the last time.

Tony Glover left life's stage this week, dying at age 79. And though he had his "loud and fun" moments playing with the icons of blues and rock 'n' roll (the accolades regarding which I will leave to others) he was much, much more than that.

He loved reading and writing. He not only spoke volumes with his harmonica, he had the heart of a scholar behind every note he played. In truth, Tony was a bookworm and could have been a poster guy for a way-cool kid's library summer reading program. I laugh to myself just thinking about what the promo for something like that would have looked like — Tony kindly beckoning school-age children with a load of books wearing his ever-present Ray-Ban sunglasses.

He was a prolific writer, and you have to be a real reader to do that. When Robert Armstrong, then books editor of the Star



Courtesy of Linda Koutsky

Charlie Maguire (left) recalls his friendship with Tony Glover (center), here pictured with Pop Wagner.

Tribune allowed me to review Joe Klein's "Woody Guthrie: A Life," Tony had just sent in his review of the same book to City Pages. Our reviews came out about the same time in December 1980, and about a week later I received a small reel-to-reel tape of obscure Woody Guthrie studio outtakes, along with a short note of appreciation for my writing. That was Tony, saying a "professorial hello" that lasted 39 years.

When the second biography on Guthrie came out in 2004 (Ed Cray's "Ramblin' Man") we teamed up and wrote an article for Hans Eisenbeis, who was editor-in-chief for The Rake: Secrets

of the City magazine. Titled "Rambling Men" (still available for reading on the official Woody Guthrie website), we passed it back and forth via e-mails.

Tony worked in a kind of Jack Kerouac-stream of consciousness-style — mostly in lowercase — and with hardly any punctuation, leaving me to whip it into shape. I was so happy it actually worked that I forgot to negotiate any money for the article. When Tony found out that there was no money coming, he e-mailed me in no uncertain terms to "find some." I dutifully passed that suggestion onto Hans, who graciously came across after the fact.

We started recording and playing together with Pop Wagner five years later, and we approached the centennial of Woody's birth and anniversary of his book "Bound for Glory" in the same way. It was "entertainment-tempered education" that won Tony's approval for coming in with us. One time I left out the word "if" in a verse of Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." "Put that word back in next time, it's the crux of the whole song!" he said.

We got together a little over dinners, and watched a music documentary once, but when dinner or the movie was over, Tony was usually on his way out the door. He had people to write, and things to think about. It was only around books that I could have some quality time with him, so I gifted him with as many books as I could just for the joy of his company.

On his cozy old porch in St. Paul he'd be sitting, plowing through another book with seemingly no connection to his own work, and as I knocked on the screen door, he'd look up, come over and say, "I can't pay you for this" as he let me in. "It's not a gift," I'd say every time. "It's something we need for our next project together."

He'd nod, and we'd get started.

Charlie Maguire lives in Minneapolis.