

# Singer, songwriter's star is on the rise

By EILEEN A. HOTH

Tom and Lou Stahl are dancing on the edge of a dream.

The Village of Hamburg couple look toward tomorrow with the stars of promise lighting their eyes.

Things are beginning to click for this Dylanesque troubadour and his teacher wife.

As Tom prepares to begin studio work on his third CD this month, he is awed to know he'll be working alongside one of the music industry's best, Armand Petri, producer for the Coo Coo Dolls and 10,000 Maniacs and winner of a Dove Award.

Fresh from his fourth appearance Tuesday on Channel 7's AM Buffalo show, Stahl will take to the stage at Nietzsche's in Allentown tonight and is playing on a circuit that takes him from Buffalo to the East Coast and points west.

Since his musical debut in March 1995, Tom Stahl has been the opening act for such major talents as Joan Osborne, Sara Craig, Tom Cochrane, Dave Mason and Loudon Wainwright III.

But the Stahls' future didn't always look this bright.

In fact, just over two years ago things got pretty grim when a herniated disk literally put the brakes on Tom's truck-driving career.

"I just wanted it to go away, but it got to the point where even laying down, the pain didn't go away. I had to take time off from work," Tom said in an interview last week at the Buffalo Street offices of The Sun.

Following delicate back surgery in the fall of 1994 Tom had a few months to ponder what to do with the rest of his life. His doctor strongly suggested a new line of work. Before life would get better for the couple, both 36, and their son, Sam, 4, it would get much worse. They would lose their Kenmore home and their health insurance.

Stahl's pensive mood evolved to a happier state as

listener think of the prolific writings of Billy Joel and Bernie Taupin.

As her husband's new vocation began to unfold, Lou (who grew up in Hamburg as Mary Lou Cookson, Immaculata, Class of '79) nurtured his growing talents and helped out where she could between her own stints as a substitute teacher with the Hamburg School District. She books shows, takes pictures for his CDs and is his inspiration and biggest fan.

Along with his numerous appearances at Nietzsche's, Tom has appeared at the Marquee at the Tralf and the Calumet. Both his performances and CDs have received rave reviews in local and music industry publications.

Stahl won the Outstanding Acoustic Award at the 1996 Artois Original Music Awards show and his CDs, *I Just Want To Be Ignorant* and *The Song Is The Thing* can be found at Media Play and Borders book stores.

Stahl has also visited Western New York schools to entertain and educate children who may or may not grow up to be writer/musicians.

he translated life's emptiness and pain into the composition of lyrics and melodies.

"First I wrote *I Just Want To Be Ignorant*," a wistful tune yearning for the innocence of yesteryear. It was destined to become the title track of his first cassette and later, a CD.

"I thought it was a really good song. Then I wrote *Barbara Ann*," a song about a relative who died young. Then came another song.

Tom also started picking at his acoustic guitar and spent a brief time taking pointers from local guitar instructor Howard Evert in Hamburg.

He began hanging out at Nietzsche's open mike sessions, vowing to himself that he would step up to the microphone soon and give it a try.

"That was my New Year's resolution," Tom said.

"I went there for the first few weeks. For three weeks, I think, I took my guitar, but I didn't do anything. Finally, one night, the only ones left were me, Mike Meldrum (host of the open mike) and Nancy, the bartender.

"And Mike said, 'you gonna do it or what?'"

A singer/songwriter was born.

"I did three songs and he said it was great and asked me if I wanted to do a show, but all I had were the three songs," said Tom.

"So I cranked out some more" for a performance

debut at Nietzsche's in a songwriters showcase held two months later.

Stahl's songs are not only pleasing musically, but his strong verbal images could stand alone as poetry in their own right. The mix is often thought-provoking and sometimes poignant.

His clear tenor conveys a wide range of emotions and takes on a Bob Dylan quality at times, especially when he accompanies his guitar playing with a lively harmonica. But if Stahl's voice reminds one of Dylan, his thoughtful lyrics also at times make a

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there's no one to blame."

But the Canisius College communications graduate is not always solemn. He has some fun tweaking the psyches of radio talk show aficionados in the lively *Fat Guys On Radio*:

"I'm not one to rush to judge, but I've heard the word now. I won't budge. Cause I know what I know. I know what I know, I get all my information from fat guys on radio."

Last June, after Tom opened a show at the Tralf for Loudon Wainwright, he was asked to sign a CD by a Wainwright fan. As he turned around to get a pen, he was surprised to see a line of autograph-seekers had formed.

"We're still learning the business," says Lou Stahl. I think sometimes being naive has helped. I'm still trying to get Rosie O'Donnell to have Tom on her show," she laughs.

She said as a neophyte, she didn't know that such calls are supposed to be done through an agent. Along with Tom's talent and buoyed by their mutual enthusiasm, perhaps their luck has changed for the better.

Rosie O'Donnell, where are you?



TOM STAHL

Stahl's lyrics often comment on tragedies in the news such as in a song about the drowning of her two children by Susan Smith and the trial of the Menendez brothers.

From *The Song Is The Thing*, *Nobody Cries*:

"Two children drowning, strapped in a car a mother left frowning yeah she's had it hard. Her stepdad abused her yeah that's what he said. Well it must've confused her cause her kids are dead. A sitcom's confusing. The news is amusing and I can't tell them apart."

He muses on race relations in *Free You, Free Me*, from the same CD:

"Brother oh brother I don't know your pain. I've never been beaten or locked up in chains. But I've been a prisoner of my own self-dissdain, with self-imposed slavery