

# Beloved Butte musician and songwriter dies at 75

***“He is an entertainer in the truest sense of the word and one which Butte is and should be proud of.”*** — The Montana Standard, 1983

Mark Staples, performer extraordinaire, died Thursday in Missoula. A successful lawyer by trade, he was also a gifted singer, songwriter and storyteller.

For decades, it was a gift he enjoyed sharing with his audiences, particularly in Butte. His unwavering love for his hometown solidified his place in Butte history.

His brother, Tom Staples, couldn't agree more.

“He loved Butte,” said Tom. “His life deserves a story.”

With songs such as “The Orphan Girl,” “Oops, Sorry, I Thought I Was in Butte,” and “Mining City Christmas,” Mark was a perennial favorite, performing benefit concerts to sold-out crowds at several local venues, including the Mother Lode and the Butte Civic Center. Add to that list, “Our Lady of the Rockies,” which he recorded with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Choir.

Tom recalled that Mark, when he was a boy, spent hours at the piano, working to emulate his dad, Dr. Ned Staples, who was also a musician.

“Mark would make up melodies even in his youth,” said Tom.

Like his father, Mark was self-taught and couldn’t read music for years.

“He learned to read music later on in life,” said Tom.

Mark's love of music continued through high school, where he was part of Butte High School’s choral group. Later, in between his college courses, Mark was Butte’s piano man and could be found “ticklin’ the ivories” from time to time at Butte’s supper clubs.

Music remained an integral part of his life even while earning an undergraduate degree from the University of Montana and graduating from Gonzaga University School of Law. So much so, at one point, he moved to California.

“He was a lyricist in Hollywood,” said Tom, “writing for Paul Anka.”

Soon, though, Mark was back in Montana, honing his craft as an attorney and entertaining audiences at night.

He told The Montana Standard in 2009 that he returned to Montana because he didn’t have the dedication to suffer for his art.

“You have to sacrifice everything for your art — friends, family, everything — and I wasn’t willing to give that up,” said Mark.

Tom said his brother was an exemplary governmental affairs counsel, teacher, lawyer and lobbyist, and yet, his musical accomplishments were his first love.

“He played at so many places and performed numerous concerts,” said Tom. “His wit and humor were unparalleled.”

Mark’s songwriting led him to record his first album in 1983.

Tom said the album, “I Stand on My Record,” was his brother’s way of sharing his life experiences, from working underground, to teaching, becoming a lawyer, and performing on stage.

“It was what his life was and is,” said Tom, “and he put them into words.”

Jim Tracy of The Montana Standard critiqued the album on Dec. 10, 1983, describing it as “no vanity production.”

“There isn’t a song on it that isn’t worth listening to,” said Tracy. “And most you want to hear over and over.”

A few years later, another album was released, titled “When Montana Sings.” The album’s title song would later be featured in a nationwide campaign to promote Montana tourism.

The 1988 campaign was a success, according to officials at Montana State University, who said the “Montana Sings promotion persuaded more people to put Montana on their vacation lists.”

The following year, he released a classical cassette titled “Shades of Romance — Songs My Father Taught Me.”

Mark’s life was not all about music. He did have a career that started as a county attorney in Conrad for several years. Later, he would become a lobbyist for the Montana Tavern Association and in 2015, was appointed as chairman of the Montana Board of Pardons and Parole by Gov. Steve Bullock.

Mike Kenneally of Butte knew Mark for years and got to know him more when he became a lobbyist.

“He was an extroverted person and loved to talk to people,” said Kenneally. “That’s why he was so successful as a lobbyist.”

Kenneally recalled that when Mark attended an MTA event, he would usually head to the piano and make up songs about people in the room.

“He had a great storytelling ability,” said Kenneally. “He was very gifted that way.”

The Butte musician had lots of fans of all ages, many of them from Butte.

One such fan was and is The Montana Standard’s Advertising Director Jenean Kujawa.

As a Whittier School fifth-grader in 1989, she was planning for her school’s declamation contest and needed a poem to recite.

Her mother, Lois Salle, advised her to write to Mark, an expert on Butte history, and ask for an original piece. To Kujawa’s surprise, he said yes and sent a poem titled “Here’s to Butte . . . And the Butte in Everyone.”

As a fifth-grader, Kujawa went on to recite that poem and win her school contest and the citywide competition.

“I thought it was pretty special,” said Kujawa, “and the fact that he took the time for a kid.”

Months later, Kujawa would receive a call from Mark, asking her to perform with him at his Mining City Christmas show.

“I thought I was big time,” she said.

To her knowledge, Mark never used the poem he sent to her, which made the gift that much more special.

“The poem is Butte to a tee,” said Kujawa.

#### [Butte poem penned by Mark Staples](#)

Forty years ago, a reviewer referred to Staples as “not only a musician, but an entertaining comedian. His showmanship, cleverness and satiric mind kept the audience in stitches whenever he was not singing.”

He also said something even more poignant — “As a songwriter, Staples’ folk songs about Butte are so witty and entertaining, they may last forever in Butte’s heritage.”

Tom feels the same way, describing Mark’s music as “extraordinary contributions and gifts for everyone to enjoy.”