

The View From Right

Drivin' the Bus: a Tribute to Todd Miller

It was during a particularly dark period for me—yes, even Right Fielders have dark days—that I connected with Todd Miller, devoted husband to Stephanie and father to Carly and Cole, member of the talented Miller family of musicians and artists, and renowned drummer who died much too young last October. Whatever circumstances brought a couple of lifelong townies—he forty-something, me fifty something—together on adjacent bar stools at Riley's that night (kids playing hockey next door, perhaps) a dozen or so years ago have faded with time, but I remember our conversation—and how he lifted me out of my doldrums—as clearly as if it had been last week.

As you might imagine, our time together went from small talk to music talk. And since my writer's curiosity stays engaged no matter where I am, our talk went even more quickly from music to drumming and from drumming to a discourse on his philosophy of drumming. What an education.

I like to think that I was never in that class of ignorami who think that the drummer is somehow a secondary part of a band, just the anonymous guy in the back wearing a muscle shirt and keeping time. Or a generic add-on like the fries that fill out the plate as an afterthought to your cheeseburger. I was better than that, I hope. But neither did I ever have it explained to me how critical the drummer is to any band's success.

"No, man, you should understand that it's the drummer who's driving the bus," Todd told me. "If the drummer isn't driving the bus, nobody knows where you'll end up. Yeah, next time you're out listening to a band, wherever—bar, concert venue, outdoor gig—focus on the drummer first before you focus on the players doing the fret board gymnastics or singing. What's he doing? Is he waiting for the light to turn green or is he driving? I mean, you can watch two drummers doing the same song using exactly the same the beats, but one's driving, one's along for the ride." It's a subtle thing, he explained, as if someone knocking out a raucous paradiddle (RIP Snake) on a tom-tom or crashing a Zildjian cymbal can be subtle. But I got Todd's message. You didn't need to be flashy like Neil Peart (Todd's hero and the iconic drummer for Rush, who died two months ago) with his 40-piece drum kit; you just had to drive the bus.

Todd was a student of his craft and a student of drummers his whole life. He became legendary for his ability to get drummers' drum sticks after concerts by being persistent, by being annoying, by occasionally embarrassing Stephanie or Carly with his resolve to get a drum tech or roadie to oblige. As testimony to his success, the hallway in the Miller house is a shrine where Todd has displayed in oak cabinets of his own making hundreds of drum sticks from the likes of Neil Peart, Larry Mullen, Jr. (U2), Steve Gadd (Steely Dan), Stewart Copeland (Police) and drummers from

Dave Matthews, Santana and a who's who of rock and roll. There are separate cabinets for guitar picks, signed photos, ticket stubs and memorabilia.

On that particular night all those years ago, however, Todd was the teacher, my teacher. A few years after my lesson, Todd joined Never Ben, East Aurora's house band, and whether I saw them at Wally's, the Rink, 189, Crookstock or the Backyard Bash as recently as last July, I made a point of seeking out Todd during a break to tell him I was watching him drive the bus. And now, whenever I hear live music, I look to the guy or girl in the back with the drumsticks first. Drivin' or ridin'?

But I didn't bring you out here to Right Field to talk about Todd Miller, the drummer, the gregarious townie, the guy whom the community will remember and celebrate at the Todd Miller event at the Jamison Road Fire Hall, Saturday, March 4 from 4-8. No, I asked you here to hear about Todd, the husband, the father, the family man, the kid who lost his father while he was still in elementary school, who had an unsettled adolescence then lost his mother at 21, but rebounded from all of that to build an unsinkable family ship, with drumming a genuine passion but superseded by his love of family.

Stephanie Miller was kind enough to help me talk about Todd by inviting me to her home for a chat on one of those recent snowy nights. Her best friend Lisa Tucker was with her and we dialed up daughter Carly at Fredonia where she is a junior studying criminal justice and psychology. I asked Carly what she would want people to know about her dad from a daughter's perspective. "He was great, such an active dad," she said. "Funny, goofy, dramatic and involved with everything we did. Cole (her brother, a freshman at Fredonia) and I were so lucky to have such loving parents. I didn't really grasp how lucky we were until I came to college and realized that not everybody had parents like ours." A quick look at Todd's last Facebook post would show the Miller family bowling for Stephanie's birthday, two days before he died. You'd see them on Sanibel Island in Florida, at Fredonia, playing sports, having fun together. Carly went on to tell me how much she enjoyed coaching her dad as he went for his GED while she was a teenager. "He was determined to earn that high school diploma, and then he was proud to tell everyone he was class of 2014."

Stephanie, who hails from Washington State, is the first to admit that she is much more the introvert, while Todd was everybody's best friend. "It's tough in a place like East Aurora. I had fun being out when Todd was playing, but I didn't want to be the center of attention. I preferred being in the background. Todd's from here, he knows everybody, he's the drummer guy at all the great parties. And everybody thinks they know him. But they didn't really. Todd was all about his kids and his family. He basically rebuilt this whole house. One of the reasons he agreed to join Never Ben is because they don't play that often, and that would give him more time with the family."

You'll understand that, as much as she appreciates the support, Stephanie's not exactly jumping up and down at the prospect of being the center of attention for

four hours at a benefit in honor of Todd. But I suggested that it's really a gift she's giving the community, allowing us to temper our grief and sense of loss while we're showing our love and support for one of our own. She'll have her kids with her and the extended Miller family—brothers Jeff, Dave and Wes and sister Jennifer—plus loyal friends aplenty who have been working on the event for three months. She won't be driving the bus, but she'll have a comfortable window seat.

As is our way, the community has responded with overwhelming generosity and donations of cash, food, drink, and prizes like the one-of-a-kind drum stool with a Neil Peart quote carved into it, made by Jim Cordes. The Miller Family and Friends, Never Ben, and NY Rockin' Revue (one of Todd's other bands) will each play a set. Auction and raffle prizes galore include condo stays here and in abroad, celebrity golf outings, sports memorabilia. Tickets are \$25 at Sammy's, Wally's, 42 North, Andrew's Barber Parlor, the Moose, the VFW, Limelite and Arriba.