

Jean Bartlett, author ([www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com))

**Portraits & Roots** (This interview with artist Steven Roark was anonymously sponsored by a member of his community)

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## Steven Roark – A quiet man's storied Art

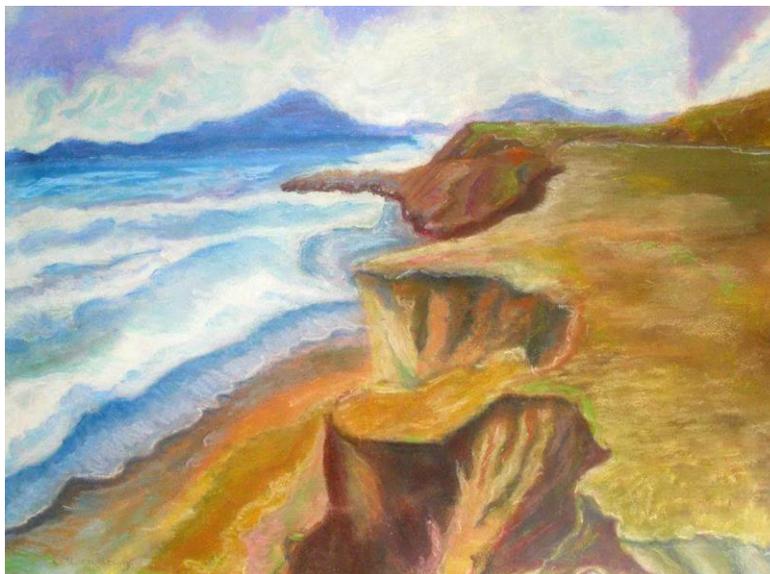
Written by Jean Bartlett

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"I had something hanging up in Pacifica's Sanchez Art Center once," said Pacifican Steven Roark. "It was an abstract, a figure of a female nude out of proportion. It was titled 'Crowded Bus.' The title was a call to the viewer's imagination. I had a wonderful teacher at the Community Center back then. Her name was Holly. This class was longer ago than I want it to be. It was a wonderful class and there were a lot of ladies in the class who were exceptional artists. Holly took me from infancy ideas about doing pastels and led me closer to the process of oil paintings. She got a blue ribbon out of me at the San Mateo County Fairgrounds." (That San Mateo County Fairground first place win went to Steven's pastel, "Silent Waves On Paper Beach." Teacher Holly selected "Crowded Bus" for a separate gallery event at the Art Center. Both events were approximately eight years ago.)

"These were both pastels," Steven noted. "My desire is oil painting, which as of today's date remains elusive and evasive. I don't want to say yet that oil paintings are open for Christmas 2019, but that's what it's all about. That's the search and the journey."



Steven Roark: "Silent Waves On Paper Beach."

The first view I had of Steven as any sort of artist actually zeroed in on his musician roots and it arrived as a gift in 2009. It was a newly pressed CD called "The Mannequin's Night Out." The band was Billy the Shape and it featured Tom La Marca on electric guitar and bass, Chicago Joe Alderson on drums and Steven Roark on harmonica, vocals

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and acoustic guitar (and listen for some backup vocals by local writer Tygarjas.) Most of the songs are by La Marca (music) and Roark (lyrics), and some of those Roark-titled tunes include: "The Lord Drives A Diesel" and "Tomorrow Is Just A Cigarette Away." It's the kind of record that musicians put on hold to do "someday" when responsibilities lessen and the day job calms down.

"We wanted to make this album which walked a tightrope between serious subject matter and humorous pitfalls," Roark said back in 2009. "We were geezers with a dream and we did it."

As the arts and features writer for the *Pacifica Tribune*, I knew this record release held the promise of a sweet local story. First we've got Steven Roark, a homegrown Pacifican. He went to Pedro Valley Elementary, Cabrillo for middle school and then Terra Nova High School. Second, he was, and is again, a Linda Mar Safeway employee. (Safeway is a supermarket chain.) Third, dreams can happen at any age. But was the record any good? You bet it is. Oh it's quirky alright, as well as fun and artsy-hip as it travels its own sound with definite inspiration blasts from such legends as Frank Zappa, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison and the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band. It's perfect unpredictablness – easily a Saturday morning big draw music selection for the Los Altos Hills popular freeform radio station KFJC 89.7FM. Steven and his bandmates have since put out more CDs and each time their groove digs deeper into serious Billboard knocking.

"'Mannequin's Night Out' was a party idea," Steven said. "That one broke the barrier. Either you do it or you don't."

However, the music of Steven is a subsection of this interview. The focus here is on his visual art. Didn't even know he did visual art until Tygarjas told me to track Steven down and see for myself. So I did. Then I took pictures of his art, showed it to a caring, involved community member and voila, this interview was sponsored and Steven and his art are here and knocking at the door.



← Steven Roark: "Man With Golden Earring."

"I've had so many financial disasters and failures with friends in the band," Steven noted. "I'm still standing up. I'm not somebody to believe in something that doesn't exist. I know there is something inside of me and art keeps me intact. It's the only thing that keeps me glued together as a person – aspirations and knowledge of ability. This is true for me in the visual arts and true for me in music. I am still writing songs. It is hard to say goodbye to band members. For whatever reason, things don't last forever. Our last album, 'Nude Dancers Wanted' was our greatest. It can't get any better. 'Nude Dancers Wanted,' which is a North Beach idea, came out two years ago already. 'Voodoo

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For Beginners' that came out five years ago and it was a wonderful album. But why try to provoke a bunch of unhappy musicians to try to do something else again? I was a ringmaster for over six years and the band had a good run. The last three albums were extremely progressive and had some very good songwriting. My next music venture will be solo. Not long before he died, my brother Paul told me I was almost 'there.' By 'there,' he meant 'country western.' Up until that moment, I never thought country western. But Paul called it. After years of it not being so, Paul and I got tight in the end. We were vines wrapping around each other." (Steven is the eldest of four brothers: Joe, his late brother Paul, and Craig, who is 11 years younger.)



**Portrait of the artist as a senior at Terra Nova High School in Pacifica, 1974.**

"Growing up in Pacifica, nothing existed for me beyond these mountains. But my father's parents lived in Tioga, Texas. That's where Gene Autry (America's Singing Cowboy, 1907-1998) was born and raised. The family gets on the road, my dad is behind the wheel, and it's Route 66 from San Francisco to Tioga, Texas. There were Dairy Queens with people with accents – faces that I'd never see again. It just kind of opened up and exposed my heart and mind to so many new things and made so many impressions on me. Looking at license plates, my mom would say, 'Hey, you spot a license plate from Iowa you get a nickel.' 'You spot a black cow with polka dots, you get a dime.' Anything to keep you quiet! I'm looking at the barbed wire wondering, why would they put barbed wire there? My younger brother Joe is looking at this little pool toy, his favorite, that he's got wrapped around his chest.

"But here's the important driving-in-the-desert tip. Do not roll down the window for anything if you are driving along a desert road. You don't think about it. But you don't see motion around you and these roads just go on forever while the radio stations fade in and out. My mom's complaining because my dad just lit a cigarette and we don't have air conditioning. My dad rolls the window down. My brother's pool toy goes right out the window. There goes our road map. It was a tornado of our stuff in the rearview mirror."

There was another incident on that desert road that Steven still rolls his eyes over all these years later. And it was the kind of incident that inspired a cartoon. He's been doing cartooning since he was 7.

"I used to draw these cartoons to help the family get over things. Example, Mom and Dad have an argument. I leave a cartoon for them. There's Mom with horns on her head blowing smoke out of her nose saying, 'If you don't like it, don't eat it.' There's my father with a three-day beard and an over-sized cigarette stuck in his mashed potatoes saying, 'C'mon honey.' But my folks would laugh about it when they saw my cartoons. It was a way of

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compromising, a way of letting them know I wasn't happy about the particular circumstance by poking fun at them and showing how I saw them.

"On Route 66, Dad hit a bird. The bird would not leave the desert road and it would not fly and Dad hit the bird and it went tumbling over the roof. I was horrified. I did a cartoon about it. It's a side view. 'Dad hits a bird.' In it I have a cop behind Dad with a siren and a \$10,000 fine."

Steven calls his work "Tomorrow" a cartoon. He did it back in 2018 when he was living in Apache Junction, Arizona. It was a year's break, not from Pacifica, but from the whirlwind of things going on musically. It took him six hours.



**Steven Roark: "Tomorrow"**

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"My mediums are: ballpoint pens, markers, pastels and acrylics. I studied a bit using charcoals but if you want to do something all black, and I'm all for it, you've got the fireplace for that. I use drawing paper. I also draw on napkins because they absorb the ink. I don't want to pay money for a big canvas. A canvas is a canvas or it's a Denny's napkin. A brush is a brush or it's a Walgreen's pen."

For tomorrow, Steven used a cheap ballpoint and two felt pens.

"The medium was pull-over-I-need pens. Usually my attitude towards felt pens is use them for lettering and most people see through the same eye when it comes to felt pens. So in order to create something which didn't look 'felt pen,' I used two very close shades of colors, so you don't see felt pens, you see a medium."

Steven and I talked about his ocean pastel "Beneath The Surface," which was placed among a series of the artist's drawings currently stored in his parents' garage. In the work, I can see the shape of a woman resting on her side.



**Steven Roark: "Beneath The Surface."**

"I'm always thinking about anatomy," the artist said. "As far as context, I like putting human personalities in drawings. As kids we do that. We put faces in daisies and then we move on. When I moved on, I moved on to Kahlil Gibran (Lebanese-American painter, poet and artist, 1883-1931, author of "The Prophet."). Gibran had an incredible effect on me as a teenager. There was a spirituality to him and he was an incredible artist."

"I discovered Kahlil Gibran through my Aunt Karen, my mother's sister. She gave me a book for Christmas. It was 'The Prophet.' She wrote, 'Steven, you may not be ready for his thoughts yet but one day you will be. Love, Karen.' Karen was living in San Francisco going through her Haight Ashbury, granny gown days. I turned that book over and found him very fascinating but I wasn't ready. I was probably in sixth or seventh grade. But it was always in the back of my mind that someday I would be ready. Finally I became ready and he was very instrumental for me as far

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as activating my thought processes, my thinking towards God and Christ and recognizing other people's philosophies of life. He pulled me in that direction in the same way that George Harrison does it with Krishna consciousness, which I really dig, and with his song 'My Sweet Lord.' George Harrison was an extremely big influence on me and his song, 'My Sweet Lord,' it puts a hook on you."

Visual art and music both arrived for Steven really at the same time. He remembers riding the swings up at Oddstad Park in Pacifica, where these two "blonde-haired ladies, playing guitar side by side, played folk tunes by people like Peter, Paul and Mary, and there was a pureness in their music. I might be on the swing but I recognized that what they did on those guitars was incredible."

Steven's parents wanted to give him guitar lessons when he was 7, but he recognized that he was too young. He didn't have the concentration. He wanted to play the guitar but he didn't want to wait the year needed before he could really deliver a song. Yet he was thinking about music all the time.

"I was exposed to the great composers when I was in fourth grade. I had an excellent teacher and he brought in records. 'This is Beethoven,' he would tell us. 'Write down what you think about his music.' 'This is Mozart.' This teacher was extraordinary."

Steven listened to Bob Dylan at an early age, and Rock 'n' Roll, and remembers loving the song "Walk Right In" (The Rooftop Singers, 1963) – not because it made a lot of sense but it had a freedom in it. He liked the freedom in music and in art. By the time he was in middle school he was ready to play guitar.



photo Jean Bartlett  
Steven Roark, 2009.

"In junior high school I met another guitar player, Greg Naumann, and we had two wonderful teachers who also played guitar: Marty Gill and Eddie Mayer. (The latter was also a left-handed relief pitcher for the Chicago Cubs in the late 1950s.) After school we would sit with Eddie and Marty and they would play guitar together and we would sing. My friend Greg was a good guitar player back then and went on to be quite good. He got me playing. He and I had a band, Captain Jake and the Jokers. We were a couple of cut-ups!"

In 1970, Steven was using a borrowed electric guitar and taking lessons from David Friedman.

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"That had to be a Sears and Roebuck guitar. The frets were too high, the strings were too high and they needed replacing, and I had ridges on my fingers at the end of every rehearsal. But that's how I cut my teeth on the guitar, pounding out songs that were fuzzy and distorted."

Steve wrote his first song in high school. He was in the band Free Ride. The song was all about Oreo cookies. It was hugely popular at Terra Nova.

"All I want is an Oreo Cookie, but I'll take any cookie you got, babe," Steven laughed/sang. "All I want is a Muriel Cigar, but I'll take any cigar you got."

Roark, who also studied violin, and would later study harmonica under the legendary Red Archibald, found a real passion for San Francisco psychedelic artwork in his high school years.

"That's probably the only reason why I am alive today. This passion for things, for music and for art, saved me. It gave me a sort-of protection because I felt like I had a destiny in art. That's why I never had that career idea. I knew I couldn't do a desk job or I would die – and I loved that psychedelic artwork/vibe. In Pacifica, on Pedro Point, we had the bookstore The Checkered Frog. They had Avalon Ballroom posters. They had books with titles like: 'I Couldn't Smoke the Grass on my Father's Lawn' (by Michael Chaplin). The guy behind the register had a beard, long hair and 12 toes, and he spoke so eloquently. It was an amazing place. There was something going on there. They had all these buttons like 'Impeach Nixon' and 'Make Love Not War.' You could buy those buttons for a quarter. And I'm also looking at the art on the Avalon Ballroom posters and I had never seen such art. It helped me understand that composition is so important. Without a story, you've just got a painting."



**Steven Roark: "Walking Pier."**

Ten years ago, Steven studied under artist Lynn Ruth Miller and won a San Mateo County Fairgrounds' "Award of Participation" for his pastel, "Man With Golden Earring."

"This piece was a personal discovery for me, a turning point. I accepted my ability to present anatomy as I do it."

In Steven's "Walking Pier," he playfully agrees that it might represent the anatomy of a pier, what it is up to when no one is looking.

"I have faith in my art," Steven noted. "It happens like the sun will come up except it's not on a schedule. A canvas is not a bus stop. I see my work as a matter of accumulation and when I have a nurtured idea, I sit down and do it. And there are many ways to tell a story. There is a concept of time in there and if you look for it you might see a season is passing."

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Steven Roark: "In Love With Janis."



Steven Roark: "A Young Woman Awakens."

What do I want to see happen with my art? I'd like to see a full canvas with a frame around it hanging in a gallery. It's putting things across. Maybe I can awaken new ideas about art in people's minds. I have a sense of humor. I put that in there. Without hot dogs there would be no baseball! Art is a form of communication, to say things when you are not there."



Photo by Jean Bartlett.  
Steven Roark, August 30, 2019.

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"A quiet man's storied Art" ~ An Interview with Steven Roark  
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