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## On His Own / With his new CD, SF sideman Tom Heyman moves a step closer to recognition on his own terms

Derk Richardson, special to SF Gate  
 Published 4:00 am, Thursday, February 23, 2006

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Since moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1998, Tom Heyman has made himself one of the most valuable sidemen on the local indie alt-country and folk-rock scene. His evocative guitar work, most typically on pedal steel, has been heard to fine effect with such artists as Jesse DeNatale, Paula Frazer, John Vanderslice, David Dondero, the Court and

Spark, Alejandro Escovedo and Chuck Prophet.


But with the recent release of his second CD, *Deliver Me*, which he celebrates with a show on Sunday, Feb. 26, at Annie's Social Club in San Francisco, Heyman moves a step closer to recognition on his own terms. "I used to see myself as a guitar player," he said in a phone conversation last week. "But I see myself primarily as a songwriter and singer."

Coming five years after the release of his solo debut, *Boarding House Rules* (Interstate Records), the new album showcases Heyman's command of a wide range of styles as he spins sometimes cryptic, sometimes detailed stories about love gone right and wrong, lucky streaks that ebb and flow, and the characters who experience it all -- buying clothes "down at the secondhand store," staring at "bottles lined up by the window" or "spaces where the pictures used to hang" and listening to "that rain waiting on the thunder" or "that AM oldies radio station playing ... the O'Jays and the Hollies and the Beach Boys and the Stones."

The music is anchored by the rhythm section of bassist Paul Olguin and drummer Paul Revelli and fleshed out by Dan Eisenberg (organ, Wurlitzer, piano), Chuck Prophet (guitar), horn and string players here and there, and a host of guest vocalists, including Greg Loiacono and Tim Bluhm of Mother Hips, Mark Eitzel, John Stiratt (Wilco), Virgil Shaw and others. Heyman sings lead with his warm, comfortable everyman's voice and plays the lion's share of electric and acoustic guitar parts. While many identify him by his signature pedal-steel style, it shows up on only three of *Deliver Me's* 13 tracks.

Actually, the weepy instrument, so inextricably associated with the Nashville and country-politan sounds of the 1950s and '60s, was never Heyman's primary ax. On the East


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Coast (he was born in Brooklyn and raised in New Jersey), where he was "pretty well established" and "pretty well locked into a bar-band thing" with the popular Philadelphia alt-country group [Go to Blazes](#), Heyman didn't even start playing pedal steel until the year before he left Philly. He took up it sitting in with the now-buzz-worthy band [Marah](#).

It came in handy, though, when he arrived in the Bay Area (in pursuit of a relationship that settled into marriage). Freelancing was foreign to Heyman, and he had to navigate his way into a new scene.

"I was sort of at odds and ends here for a while," he recalled. "With Go to Blazes, we sort of grew up making music together. It was a very insular thing. It's hard to be a freelancer after that. When you find yourself alone, it's different. It took me a long time to get to the place where I was comfortable playing with people. But since I played steel, it became my main entree into freelancing -- it helped me get some work."

"Half the battle was having one," he said with a laugh, "and I had one. So I could say, 'Yeah, I'll come to rehearsal and bring my steel.' When I started playing with the [Court and Spark](#), it was featured pretty prominently. I wound up getting some work from that, and that's what people knew me for. I really did consider myself a guitar player before anything else, but guitar players are a dime a dozen."

On pedal steel, Heyman's specialty -- as you can hear on the Court and Spark's *Witch Season* and [Paula Frazer's Leave the Sad Things Behind](#) -- is color and mood, not blazing lead lines a la [Speedy West](#).

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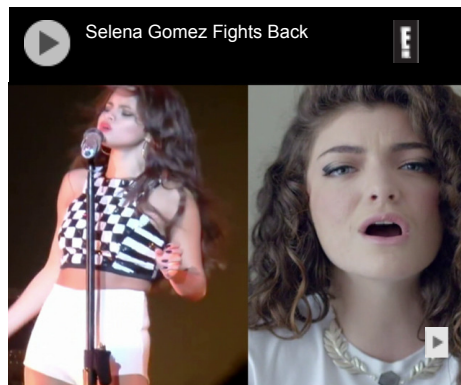
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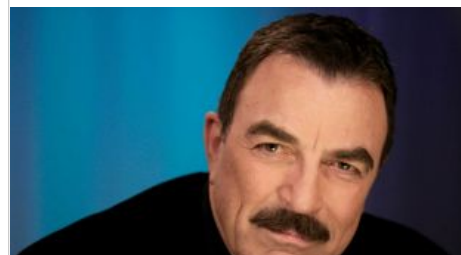


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