

Paul Pena, 55, Blues Guitarist And a Songwriter, Is Dead

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 4 (AP) — Paul Pena, a San Francisco blues guitarist who wrote one of the biggest hits for the Steve Miller Band, died here on Saturday. He was 55.

The cause was complications of diabetes and pancreatitis, his Web site said.

Mr. Pena is perhaps best known for writing "Jet Airliner," a Top 10 hit in 1977. He lived off the royalties from that song.

He is also familiar to audiences for the 1999 Academy Award-nominated documentary "Genghis Blues," which tells the story of how he took up Tuvan throat singing.

Mr. Pena, almost completely blind since birth and plagued by illnesses most of his life, was born in Hyannis, Mass. He proved to be a natural musician, singing and teaching himself several instruments. In the late 1960's, he was in a band that opened for big-time acts including the Grateful Dead and Frank Zappa. Blues artists ranging from T-Bone Walker to B. B. King to Bonnie Raitt recognized his talents, hiring him to play guitar in their bands.

In 1971 Mr. Pena moved to San Francisco, where he played many gigs, frequently opening for Jerry Garcia's and Merle Saunders' bands.

The author of 'Jet Airliner' took up Tuvan throat singing.

Mr. Pena became interested in throat singing when he heard a Tuvan broadcast on his shortwave radio in 1984. Later he found a Tuvan record, playing it countless times until he learned how to throat sing, which involves producing several distinct vocal-cord sounds simultaneously. In 1993 he demonstrated his technique to Kongar-ol Ondar, one of the foremost throat singers in the world. Mr. Ondar was impressed with Pena, nicknaming him Earthquake and inviting him to Tuva to participate in the annual competition.

His 1995 journey to Tuva, where he won awards in the contest and charmed local residents who were delighted with this foreigner who had mastered their art form, is recounted in "Genghis Blues."

He is survived by his parents, Jack and Virginia Pena of Harwich, Mass., and two brothers, Jim of Lynnfield, Mass., and Peter.