

A Conversation with Steve Earle
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 12/2001)

Steve Earle, back seven years from the Point of No Return, now threatens to become one of modern music's Renegade Renaissance Men. He was on a one way ride right off this planet when they locked his ass up, and he came out with 90 days clean and never looked back.

It's staggering that a short seven years later he cut another half dozen records, started a successful record company, wrote and had published a great book of short stories, started a theater company, and he tours most of the year to an international following that is among the most rabid in the business. His myth is archetypal, it's irresistible. In a jaded town like Nashville, I can't tell you how many of the finest and smartest women here have said to me "I love Steve Earle! Don't even talk to me about Steve Earle!" and stuff like that—it's insane, I'm telling you. He's revered by literati and bikers alike, from Yale to jail. There's nobody like him.

He combines the essential outlaw ethic (not the image, the reality) with the man of letters, writes songs that absolutely lay you right out, and embodies the I don't give a good goddam attitude that makes the myth grow on its own steam, he doesn't really do a thing to further it but work like the devil. So you got to love him, what can I say. He's funnier than hell, donates his time and energy tirelessly for a number of important issues like the death penalty and a landmine-free world, and is one of the ten most respected singer songwriters of any style on the planet today. His catalog of over a dozen records still sell very well, and many freely combine the styles of music at which he excels: Bluegrass, Rock, Folk, Country, and Country Blues. He'll release a stone Bluegrass record and then a Rock record right behind it, and they'll both sell. Nobody gets away with that in this business except Steve Earle.

I was lucky to catch him in town between projects, and we sat down in Fido for a hot forty minutes. Typically, we hit topics that ran all over creation, and Steve offered very informed and opinionated views on every one. Some interview subjects are so naturally and entertainingly talkative that they don't really even need questions, just turn on the tape, maybe turn over a few flash cards with pictures of Bo Diddley or Saddam Hussein, or a quote from the Koran. We're grateful he took some time out of his busy schedule for a Puremusic interview.

[The tape opens up with laughing, I can't remember what at, but we did a lot of that.]

Puremusic: You're one of the busier, more spread out singer songwriters that can be found anywhere. What are you up to lately?

Steve Earle: God, let's see. Since the tour ended, which is about two months ago, finally—it was long, a year and a half—I walked into this theater company we started with both feet, it just worked out that way. Our first show went up in September, and Sara

was in that show. Which meant that I mainly chased kids for a lot of the time that that was going up. Then I saw all 18 performances, which I swore I wasn't going to do. But I did, staying every night and seeing every show.

I was working as a producer on that show. Then we went almost immediately into *The Vampire Monologues*, Jeremy Childs' show, which had to go up straight away for Halloween, marketing-wise. So we ended up doing two shows back to back right at the top, *Mud* in September and *The Vampire Monologues* in October.

PM: Who wrote *Mud*?

SE: *Mud* is by Maria Irene Fornes, who is a Cuban American playwright. She was in New York around the same time that Sam Shepard was, before Shepard went to London, that original downtown, off-off Broadway movement. She's won eight Obies, and *Mud* was one of them. She's actually becoming one of my favorite writers. I knew about her, but I didn't really know her work until one of the people involved in the company brought this play in, and we all read it and fell in love with it.

The Vampire Monologues was written by Jeremy Childs, who's a writer and actor here in Nashville, one of our best local actors. Last year, another theater company had it, and we just upgraded it a little bit. I was in it, which was sort of an accident, you won't see me doing a lot of that. But it was fun, and because I had a schedule to keep, we were only up two weekends. The morning after it closed I flew to London and did three shows with my son and sister, we've been doing that occasionally.

PM: Just the threesome, or with a band?

SE: It's just the three of us. All of us playing separately, and then doing some things together. It's kind of "An Evening With..." and it's kinda cool. Then I went out to Wales because Marah, one of the bands on E-Squared [Earle's record company] was making their second album at Rockfield, and I wanted to check and see how that was going.

PM: What are they about, Marah?

SE: They're a rock band, from Philadelphia.

PM: Let's have a few words about Ireland, and your writing experience there.

SE: Well, you know, the greatest poets in the English language are nearly all Irish.

PM: We make poor physicists, but excellent bards.

SE: Yeah, I don't know any Irish physicists...but I think poetry is in the rocks of Ireland. It's a very literary country. There's a strong oral tradition there, and I think that's part of it. They're the greatest poets in the English language, and it's not even their language, they had it shoved down their throats and mastered it. It's a very musical place, and I've

always loved it. We've always done very well there, it's always sort of liked us, so it makes it easy to like a place. Then I fell in love with Galway, on the West Coast. Galway's a college town, and has all that, a town that artists have been living in the margins of for many years.

PM: The coolest town, they say.

SE: Yeah, every dog has a bandana around its neck and a frisbee in its mouth, the correct number of espresso machines per capita, a lot of girls, it's a great place.

PM: How is *Doghouse Roses* going over? [Steve's recent book of short stories, see our review.]

SE: It's done really well. Most of the reviews have been good. The couple of writers that have really hated it probably have stacks of unpublished manuscripts sitting at home. That's one of the things that happen when you write. And some of the reviews that haven't been totally positive have been constructive. Imagine that, it's a rare occurrence nowadays.

PM: Did you take anything away that you remember from any of the negative reviews?

SE: I don't usually read reviews. I read more reviews of the book than I'd read record reviews for many years. But I don't take anything away from it. No review is ever going to affect whether I'm going to do something, or how I'm going to do it. I think the criticism that I take to heart is from other writers that I respect.

PM: How's home life, and how are the kids?

SE: Everybody's fine, you know. My kids are older, and Sara's kids are younger. It's like starting all over again.

PM: How young are Sara's kids?

SE: They're 12 and 9 years old. It makes Christmas a lot more fun. I thought my days of staying up till four in the morning cussing at instructions written in Japanese and translated to German and then into English were over, but I'm back at it.

PM: They say your boy is a real good guitar player.

SE: Who, Justin? He's a better guitar player than I am, he's got a thumb like a jackhammer. Fingerpicks better than I do, for sure. He's writing a lot of good songs, one that really makes me jealous.

PM: What's that one called?

SE: "The Time You Take."

PM: Is he a thumbpick player, or just bare thumb?

SE: He usually can't keep up with a thumb pick, so he uses just his thumb a lot. He aspires to using thumbpicks.

PM: So many people out there with a soft thumb learned from Mississippi John Hurt. Who's Justin's big fingerpicking influence?

SE: Mance Lipscomb. He knows all that stuff, but Mance Lipscomb is probably his biggest influence.

PM: That's cool. Hard to find any kids that know shit about Mance Lipscomb.

SE: He went from Nirvana to Mance Lipscomb overnight. I mean, that stuff was always around, if he wanted to listen to it. The bad thing about it, of course, is that all my Mance Lipscomb records have disappeared.

PM: Are there songwriters out there today, not ones we grew up with, that are turning you on, that make you work harder?

SE: Joe Henry is one. Ron Sexsmith, too. I know I'm gonna leave someone out that's really, really good. Julie Miller is really that good.

PM: She gets down to the nitty gritty.

SE: Julie Miller is just one of the best songwriters that I know, period. Let's see, who else. On a pure literary level, and I automatically go to that, I think those three are that good. There are a lot of people that just write really good tunes. The thing about Ron Sexsmith is that it's really easy to dismiss his work, because he's so strong a melody writer. Lyrically, he's as good or better than most good songwriters, but he has absolutely no peer melodically. No one is consistently writing good melodies the way that he is.

PM: I just had that conversation with my girlfriend yesterday, that when it comes to chord progressions, the melody over the progression, and the way the words are married to the melody, that you can't beat the cat.

SE: But I think that's the difference. I think Ron is literally writing melodies, and the chord changes are incidental and subservient to the melody. Whereas most of us grew up listening to the Beatles, and for us writing melodies works around the chord changes, that the melody is the thing that slides around the top of the chord changes. It may not even solidify until you're ready to commit it to tape.

PM: Ron's walking down the street writing a melody without a guitar in his hand.

SE: That's exactly what I mean, that's more how he does it. And that's what never stops for him. What never stops for me is language. But he's just a very melodic writer, and I think it's important to study how other people write and have written, don't dismiss Gilbert and Sullivan, or the tradition of greats that led up to the possibility of there being such a thing as Pop music. And then when it stopped being just Pop music and became literature again. Because it did start out as literature, songwriting began as literature. Then there was a period in the middle when it really wasn't. Certainly with the advent of Bob Dylan, it became literature again.

The sonnets are songs, they were written to be sung. Sonnets are guys writing in English, imitating an Italian song form. It was a form definitely sung as often as it was recited. The Italians were a huge influence on everyone and everything in Shakespeare's time. In that period they were the ones that were really doing something. I think there are really only four original Shakespearean plays. The rest are either historical, or the plots are wholly lifted from this Italian novel form, like melodramas. That's why so many of them are set in Italy. "Romeo and Juliet," "Much Ado About Nothing," and many that are not set in Italy, they came from a populist form of literature.

PM: Italian templates, blueprints. What are the four originals?

SE: Yeah. Are there four? "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "The Tempest," that's two... Can't think of them right now. I hate brain damage, it takes up half my time.

PM: What prose writers are motivating you? Do you have a novel in you?

SE: I've started a novel. I've got so many other things going on that I basically wrote the first chapter, marked it up for a rewrite and set it down. I sent it to my editor, and he dug it, so it sort of became a project at that point. But I marked it up for a rewrite and set it down until I finish the play I'm working on, I've got too many unfinished things out there.

PM: You're knee deep in a play, then?

SE: Oh yeah, I've been working on it for about a year and a half, two years. That's the get up in the morning and work on it project for some time now.

PM: So what about prose writers, you want to get into that?

SE: God, there's a bunch. Madison Smartt Bell is probably my favorite historical fiction writer, he's from here, but teaches somewhere in Baltimore. He's written 11 novels, and is two years younger than me. He's written two great historical novels about Haiti, he spends a fair amount of time there, and a bunch of other great stuff. Then Tony Earley, who lives here, has written some incredible short stories and a great novel, called *Jim and the Boys*. I just recently met him, but I've been a fan for a while. He teaches at Vanderbilt. I believe he's from North Carolina originally. I love Annie Proulx, and recently discovered Mikhail Bulgakov.

Bulgakov's really a playwright, and I'm trying to find his plays, but he wrote a couple of novels, including one called *The Master and Margarita*. It was written in the thirties, he died in the forties. He scared Joseph Stalin bad enough that Stalin didn't kill him, and gave him the creative directorship of a small theater instead, to keep him in the Soviet Union. The guy was so nuts he actually wrote Stalin demanding an exit visa, because he was being artistically compromised, when Stalin was killing everybody. So Stalin called him personally and gave him this directorship. *The Master and Margarita* is about the devil showing up in Moscow with a small entourage of creatures, including a giant cat that drinks vodka and plays chess, and basically leveling the place. At the end the devil and his cohorts are hanging out and watching this huge section of Moscow burn.

PM: What would you say are your biggest obstacles at the moment, and how are you approaching them?

SE: My biggest obstacles at the moment? I don't really think in terms of obstacles. My biggest obstacle is always myself. If I can get Me out of the way, I can do anything. If I'm bogged down doing something, it's never anybody else, it always turns out to be me. It may take me some time to admit that, because once I admit it, I actually have to take some action. Sometimes a rest for me is just procrastinating about admitting that it's me and getting on with it. If there is such a thing as a workaholic, I'm it, and that's what passes for leisure.

PM: I know you are a spiritual kind of guy. Does it have any particular slant, Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise?

SE: No, almost none whatsoever. I think that you can get to God almost any of those ways, and I've known people that have gotten to God in various ways. I used to think that there wasn't a God, and then came to think, "Well, there's probably a God, but there's no way anybody's getting to Him through organized religion," and that's arrogant. I doubt very seriously if any people that work up here at the diocese are any closer to getting into Heaven than I am. But I think it's possible for a person who goes to Mass every morning and works with that belief system to reach God. I don't know about Heaven and Hell, my belief system doesn't include that, but that doesn't mean that I'm right, it just means that it's not important to me. It's not an issue, I don't have a dog in that fight. But I'm really close to some people with a really strict Judeo-Christian orientation. I would tend to have more in common with someone who was a Buddhist, simply because I find Buddhism more tolerant than any other belief system I've run across.

Actually, in its purest form, Islam is incredibly tolerant. That makes what's going on in the world really bizarre. There's nothing in their holy tenets that supports the killing that's gone on. It's the youngest of all major religions, it's only 500 years old. It recognizes all the Old Testament and New Testament prophets and Buddha, and Christ specifically. It's not anti-Christian, we've been told a lot of shit about it.

Me, I'm spiritually retarded, I need to be knee deep in water with a fly rod in my hands, that's about as close to God as I get. Luckily, I travel a lot and can afford to do such a thing. But I'm retarded, I have a hard time sitting on the floor and crossing my legs, or doing yoga to get to God. Absolute spiritual retard. If I wasn't hit over the head with the Grand Canyon, sunrises and sunsets... I cannot afford to miss sunsets. I bought my house, the one material thing I own that's worth anything, because of how it faces west. My poor ex-wife, she wanted to see the closet space and stuff, wanted to know if everything worked. I walked in, and the sun happened to be setting in this huge plate glass window, and I said, "Okay, I'll take it." It's one of the reasons we're not married anymore. Luckily, I ended up with the house, because she actually hated the joint. I feel bad about that sometimes. But I bought it for the sunsets, and I need to see every sunset I can, and I need to not miss meteor showers.

PM: Were you out, too, the other night at 4 AM?

SE: Oh yeah, it's dark where we live, I just had to walk out in the backyard. But I'm never going to reach it by looking inside of me, I need to be hit over the head continually with proof positive that there is a God.

PM: Help me out. I'm disturbed that after the events of 9/11, the best I can seem to do at the moment is "Let's find all those people and exterminate their asses." Now I also know that that's not necessarily the answer. What's your take on it?

SE: Well, you know, I've spent a lot of time on the death penalty issue in this country, so I'm dealing with exactly that emotion all the time. You have every reason in the world to be that angry, and to be that hurt. My feeling and opinion—and those are two different things, how I feel and what I really think about it—is that a line exists between feeling that way and what you do about it. I think that we start to diminish ourselves as soon as we start acting in anger, or acting from hurt. I don't think Osama Bin Laden's in Afghanistan, or that he's been there for weeks. Would you stay if you were him? He got on a goat, and he went to Pakistan or somewhere.

PM: Like a turkey through the corn.

SE: I also don't believe that we're looking for Osama Bin Laden. The hunt for Osama Bin Laden is making politicians appear like they're doing something for us, doing the job that we set them up to do. They're gonna go into Iraq, that's what this is about. And it's not even about Saddam. We decided we were gonna get Castro in '58, he's still there. We decided we were gonna get Kadhafi in the early 80s, he's still there. We decided we were gonna go get Saddam 7 or 8 years ago, and he's still there. So, obviously either we don't really mean to get these people, or we're not really very good at getting them. We've gotten Diem, and we've gotten other people. But I don't think it's about anything that they say it's about.

As far as what happened on the 11th...no one's asking "What did we do to make somebody fly an airplane into a building and kill so many people?" Focus on the guy

doing the flying, that's not a cowardly act. Leaving a bomb in a crowded place and running away, that's a cowardly act. There's no way that those guys were cowards, and only the most extreme hate could make someone do something like that.

PM: It doesn't hurt to have a belief system that tells you such an act reserves your place in heaven.

SE: Well, that's true. But there's propaganda involved in that, too. They probably are told that. But what did we do to be able to convince somebody that that would be a good thing to do? What did we do to make them hate us so much? Nobody's asking those questions. There's stuff that goes on in Saudi Arabia that made Osama Bin Laden the way he is. That doesn't mean it's justified, just means that it wouldn't have been that hard to predict. And we trained Osama Bin Laden, and we trained Saddam. We trained Noriega too, though we did manage to get him, he's still in jail.

PM: Do you have plans that involve movies, acting or making a movie?

SE: That's one area of art that really repels me. Great films are great films. But for the most part, the film industry...I deal with it all the time, and I'm getting ready to stop. Every time I'm asked to write some music or contribute some music to a film, I end up pissed off at somebody. Though there are exceptions, they mostly think about music last, and then they want it Now. There's so much money involved, there's almost no way that it could turn out right.

It gets back to the way we think. They're watching 9/11, and licking their chops. Their deal is, let's kill every movie that has the World Trade Center in it, like *Spiderman* is gone. But as soon as they think the coast is clear, they're going to apply the formula. They're making some of those movies right now. The central formula in this country, and I've brought this up before when dealing with the death penalty issue, is that you have a guy that gets the shit kicked out of him for two thirds of the movie. Then, two thirds through the movie, he starts killing everyfuckinbody. That's the foolproof formula. All American movies are about that. If it's a family movie, then it's the cats against the dogs, and no one actually dies. We survived two terms of a President whose favorite movie was *Rambo*, and he watched it over and over and over. All these kids around us were raised during that time. It's scary.

PM: What old Blues or Jazz do you like, and is there any ethnic music you're partial to?

SE: My taste in Jazz is pretty basic, and pretty archaic, I guess. I am a fan of Hard Bop, I like Bird and Dizzy Gillespie and the original K.C./New York connection. But I also like the West Coast stuff a lot, I dig Zoot Sims and Chet Baker, I don't think that's a lesser form of Jazz. It's just different, and a product of the environment. And that's the only kind of Jazz I really understand. When it starts becoming math, I don't get it.

PM: But you like the late 50s and early 60s quartets and the like, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, like that?

SE: I love Miles Davis, I like Coltrane, sure. Wes Montgomery is lost on me, the only Jazz guitarists that really knocked me out were Django Reinhardt and John McLaughlin. The problem with the Jazz Rock fusion in the 70s was that most of it never rocked. But I loved the Mahavishnu Orchestra, they were the loudest thing I'd ever heard. It had the tonality of Jazz and the energy and volume of Rock. Billy Cobham would come out and play for 10 minutes by himself, and then the rest of the band would walk out. McLaughlin played that Gibson doubleneck in those days through a 100 watt Marshall and two 4x12 cabinets. The thing would be leaning against the amp, and he'd walk over to it and turn the volume control up and the rig would go "ba-wa-ah" [makes a Harley/motorboat combo sound, laughing]. That was the Birds of Fire tour.

PM: And Blues?

SE: I listen to Delta stuff and acoustic stuff more than I do electric stuff. It doesn't mean I don't like electric stuff, just that I'm more interested in Country Blues, because I can play it. But I'm from Texas, and a lot of my contemporaries and friends came out of Freddy King's band. Guys my age and a little older, the Vaughns and even Johnny Winter, and Rocky Hill, who's Dusty Hill's brother. Gary Nicholson and most of Delbert's original band were all Freddy King Band veterans. It's really a Fort Worth thing, more than a Dallas thing. There was a chain of nightclubs called The Cellar After Hours Clubs. The original one was in Fort Worth, but there was one in Dallas and one in Houston, and there was one in San Antonio for a short period of time. I played San Antonio and Houston. Johnny Carroll managed the Houston Cellar. I was very much into Blues based stuff when I was a teenager, 13-14, and I was in a Blues band. I really loved the Brit stuff that came along that was completely and totally Blues.

PM: Yardbirds, and all that.

SE: That was even earlier, and I definitely loved the Yardbirds. They were one of my favorite bands. But I mean the Jeff Beck Group, *Truth* and *Beck-ola*. They were outstanding, and *Here Comes Shuggie Otis* came out in 1968, that was a very good year. My band basically played everything on *East West* [the classic Paul Butterfield Blues Band record] and we did shuffles, that kind of stuff. I played piano in that band, and was the singer. And we played in two keys, because of my limitations on the instrument.

PM: C and G.

SE: That's right. It was just where I was. All the kids on the South Side wore cowboy hats and were into Country music, and if you were going to be into anything other than Country music, all this Blues based stuff was coming out, and we were into it. As far outside that box we got was *Spirit*, that's as psychedelic as we got.

[At this point, we realized he had to leave for the studio. He let me snap a photo, and we walked back to where our cars were parked.]