



# Revolution in the Head

Steve Earle's new album, *The Revolution Starts...Now*, is his most emphatic musical statement yet in an increasingly politicised career. In New York to take part in the anti-Bush protests coinciding with the Republican Convention, he tells David Davies about the shame of his 'lost' years, the need for radical change and why his cattle-dog is more than capable of outwitting Dubya...

Little wonder that Steve Earle is so fired up. In excess of 500,000 people at the demonstration's peak, winding slowly but defiantly through the streets of New York City to make one simple point – they are damned if they're going to tolerate another four years of George W. Bush at the helm of their increasingly mixed-up country.

*TotalMusic* speaks to Earle a matter of hours after Bush's closing speech at the Republican Conference, and it's clear that the level of protest has put him in an optimistic frame of mind. "It was a little tense at times, but the big march was actually pretty joyous because nobody had to do anything – there were five hundred thousand of us and only 20,000 [Republican supporters]," he laughs. "They're definitely behind on this one! New York couldn't go Republican on a bet, so it was interesting to see them in that position."

If Bush's failing domestic policy isn't enough to see him ejected come November's election, Earle is convinced that a level of foreign intervention so great that a Vietnam-style draft is now a distinct possibility, will be. "People really are allergic to bodybags in this country since Vietnam," he believes. "I think they're now starting to realise that that's what we're going to get."

## WRITING TO THE MOMENT

Recognising that he needed the freshly-penned 'The Revolution Starts...Now' and 'Rich Man's War' to be heard before the election for them to have a proper impact, Earle found himself in the unusual position of writing everyday for this new album. Working up songs in response to the brewing political storm, he recalls that "on day three I was waking up in the morning with a blank piece of paper, so whatever was going on affected what I wrote."

Co-produced with regular 'Twangtrust' collaborator Ray Kennedy, *Revolution...* is Earle's most rough-and-ready album yet. The righteous anger that infuses the two aforementioned songs is even more apparent on 'F the CC', an anti-establishment tirade that shows just how far he has come

since he was the toast of Nashville in the mid-'80s.

Lest anyone think his new album is all air-punching polemic, 'I Thought You Should Know' and the gorgeous 'Comin' Around' – the latter featuring regular collaborator Emmylou Harris – show there is still a side of Earle interested in what he terms "chick songs". He adds: "I Thought You Should Know' is back to the reason every guy picks up a guitar – it's about getting girls."

This even extends to a tongue-in-cheek paean to famously ice-cool National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, 'Condi, Condi'. "I just played an instore in Washington DC and was hoping she would show up, but she didn't," chuckles Earle. "To be honest, I was kind of bummed."

## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

If he's now undoubtedly one of America's most respected musical forces, it's a destiny that would have seemed unlikely a decade ago. Following an initial run of success, his innate tendency towards hedonism led him deep into drug addiction as the '90s dawned. After numerous failed attempts to straighten out his problems, a stint in jail gave him the juddering shock to the senses he needed.

"In about two weeks, I'll have been clean ten years," he says, proudly. "Sometimes I don't even recognise that guy anymore. But I'm proud of a lot of the music I made before that and I don't have a record that I'm ashamed of. Sure, I'm ashamed of everything I did in the late '80s/early '90s outside of my craft, but there's nothing I can do about that. I can't get it back now – I just have to go on."

Earle's artistic drive since he got clean has been undeniable, with a play and a collection of short stories appearing alongside his prolific musical output. He's currently six chapters into a novel, but is putting the work aside for a tour that will take him through the key "battleground" states in the run-up to the election in November.

Like Bruce Springsteen, who has cast off non-partisan instincts for the first time in his career to call for Bush's ejection, Earle

believes there is simply no way an engaged artist can sit on the fence this time around.

"I've got a cattle-dog that's a lot smarter than the president of the United States we've got right now!" he laughs. "We're in really crucial times and having a dumbass at the helm is scary."

Professing Bush's re-election to be an "unthinkable" prospect, Earle doesn't rule out emigration – something several of America's leading creative types have hinted at recently. "I always thought the odds were against me dying in this country, and I thought for sure I'd be living in Ireland by now," he admits. "[But] I'm not gonna fucking leave my country like this because my grandchildren are going to have to grow up here. If I ever leave here, I want to walk not run, so they may have to put up with me for a while yet."



## Steve Earle on CD

Although compromised by some boxy '80s production, Earle's first major work, *Guitar Town*, remains one of alt-country's defining works. His albums during the late '80s/early '90s were unsurprisingly erratic as Earle began to spend more time in the crack-den than the recording studio. But, off drugs and suitably re-energised, 1997's *El Corazon* returned him to something like top form. The sequence of albums he has made since then have garnered him cross-generational respect, although by Earle's own admission, the prickly *Jerusalem* (2002) alienated some of his traditional fanbase. With the mood in the US changing, new album *The Revolution Starts...Now* seems like the ideal soundtrack to what commentator John Zogby has labelled the "Armageddon election". Finally, if you want to catch up on Earle's long, strange journey, Laurent St. John's biography, *Hardcore Troubadour*, is both rigorous and readable.

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