

Seasick Steve

Words: Gareth Stack

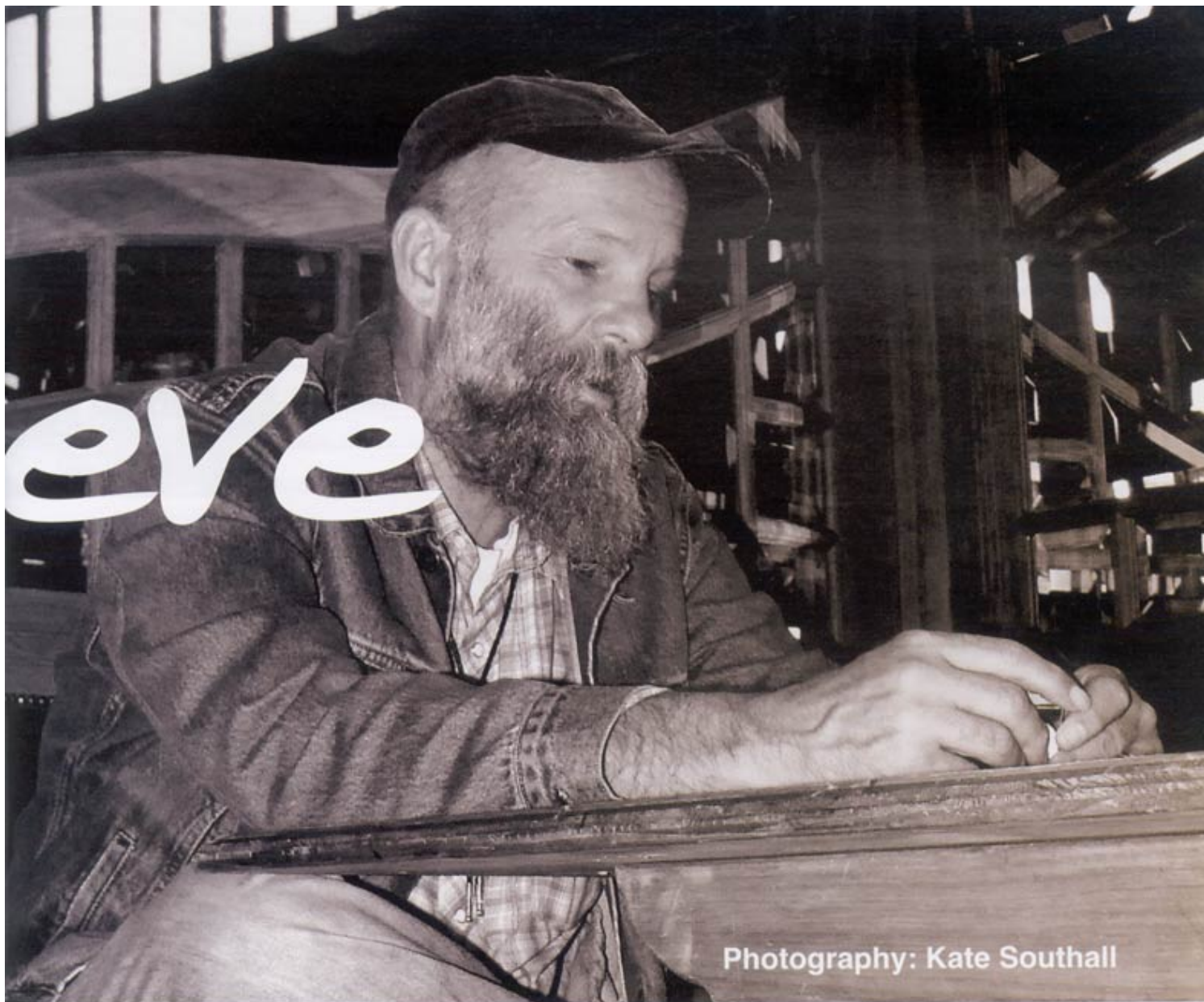
Next to Seasick Steve, it's impossible not to feel a little fake. This is a man who plays the 'one string Diddley Bow', a two by four with a steel guitar string crudely nailed at either end, a man who learnt to play at the feet of someone named 'Gentleman George outta St. Louis'; a man who rode the rails as a hobo, lived rough playing 'three string, two string, one string, sometime no string guitar', because 'a lotta times, you didn't have all the strings. If you stop when you break a string you don't eat'.

Seasick Steve (christened Steve Wold) is the real deal, and next to him we're all a little less authentic. Kicked out of home at thirteen by a violent stepfather, Seasick became a factotum - tirelessly crossing the United States, working dozens of jobs. "Forty five years ago, riding the train, I used to play music on the streets. People started listening and I started to get club requests. I didn't choose that life, that's just how I ended up. Once I got the chance there was no reason not to do it. I could live in a little room somewhere. That was a long time ago."

Steve became a session musician and producer during the 90's, cutting perhaps eighty Seattle punk and grunge records at his own 'Moon Studios'. He

continued playing clubs to a small but loyal following, earning a little but never making it big, never getting the chance to release his own material. Steve was too young when he left home and too old when he found steady work to ever get the habit for it. He continued to travel, finally ending up in Norway, the home of his current wife Elisabeth, where he earned his unforgettable nickname on a rough Blues Cruise to Denmark. Then a couple of years ago something changed.

"I started playing with [deceased blues legend] R.L. Burnside and Jon Spencer [of New York revivalists Blues Explosion], and kids started coming. The people who used to like blues, they listen to Eric Clapton, they don't like it, what I do, and I didn't think kids would like it either". As it turns out, hipsters and music aficionados, raised on the musical abundance of the internet, Robert Johnston and Led Belly by way of Kurt Cobain (below whom Steve once lived in Seattle), find something to love in Seasick's uptempo boogie blues. It's easy to see why Seasick's particular brand of 'song and dance' has separated him from blues revivalists like the White Stripes or Kings of Leon. Seasick's act is more about the great western story telling tradition (think Utah Phillips) than Mississippi or Chicago blues. "I don't know if I belong to anything, but that's more important than playing the guitar - guitar was a second thing, something so they won't walk away so quick." He attributes his success not so much to originality as to the re-discovery of something lost, something from the roots of rock and roll. "People nowadays are hungry for something a little bit different, a little bit raw. People been playing guitar behind their head a long time, Zepplin and Hendrix didn't invent that, it's not a new thing, the old Delta guys back in the 20's did that as a trick at parties."



Steve hangs out after gigs, walks through the crowd, wireless electric guitar hanging from his Denim dungarees, "I'd do that if there were 10,000 people. People haven't seen that before." These days though, it gotten harder to mingle with his audience, as he plays to crowds in the tens of thousands at festivals across Europe. There are places in the UK Seasick Steve can't go without getting mobbed in the street. All of this started because Joe Cushley, a DJ on Resonance 104.4 FM, heard his music somewhere and wanted to get a CD; but the big break was an appearance on Jules Hollands 2006/2007 'Hogmanay' new years show. "Playing for five million people is a lot different to playing for a few thousand."

I tell Steve I'm surprised to learn he's stuck by his woman, despite success, and it's attendant benefits. "That's the way to get unmarried. I've been married before, and that's how I got out of it, whoring and such. Let me tell you the best pick up line I ever heard", he says, effortlessly breaking into the story telling mode that's hooked him a new generation of

fans. "I was playin' in Belfast last year and this young girl, maybe twenty comes up and she says 'I love you', and I thank her, cause everybody says that, and she says it again, 'I love you', and I thank her once more, but she looks at me and says 'No, you don't understand, I love you. You see that guy over there? That's my boyfriend, and I've just told him I love you too.' I tell her, I say, 'Girl, I am old enough to be your grandfather,' and she looks me right in the eye, tells me 'If you were my grandfather I'd be into incest.'

Steve is philosophical about such celebrity obsession. "It's weird looking the way I do, walking along the street women cross the road to avoid me, I look like an old bum or some such. But you play music... I got so many girls after me, and they really are. You see somebody performing, somebody with talent, and that's so attractive."

Seasick Steve played the Spiegel tent at the Dublin Fringe Festival on the 18th of September. His album 'Dog House Music', is available now.