

I've been writing about Steve Earle since his scorching 1986 "Guitar Town" debut. I tried to keep a light on him during his darkest periods. My profile of Steve for the *Journal of Country Music* for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum appeared in "Da Capo Best Music Writing 2000," guest editor Peter Guralnick. These are a couple of my pieces from the period where Steve was trying to regain his footing.

April 11, 1995—

Steve Earle has been to hell and back.

The singer-songwriter, who turned 40 in January, has conquered a 26-year heroin addiction that took him through Nashville slums and county jail. His new acoustic record "Train a' Comin," released on the independent label Winter Harvest, reaffirms one of country music's most important voices.

Between 1986 and 1990, Earle made bold country records with crunchy-sounding guitars and poignant lyrics that had a passionate effect on rock. Many called him the country Bruce Springsteen.

Even the numbing shadow of heroin couldn't slow Earle down. "I got away with it (addiction) for reasons that aren't really important," he said last week in a conversation from his Nashville home. "But in my getting away with it, I accomplished more than most junkies. A lot of that's luck. But it got to the point where all the yets happened to me. I stopped writing when it became a full-time job to support my drug habit. It's that simple."

The final yet happened late last July. Earle was sitting behind the wheel of his 1993 Mercury coupe when Nashville cops busted him with crack cocaine, a glass pipe and 10 syringes. Charged with misdemeanor drug possession, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a year in jail.

Earle began his sentence Sept. 13 at the Davidson County Criminal Justice Center, but his withdrawal pains were brutal. "It takes a while for withdrawal to start, and I was a sick puppy," he said. After a 10-day jail stay and a plea on Nashville television, Earle was transferred to the Lincoln Regional Hospital in Fayetteville, Tenn., for detox. He was placed on methadone, a heroin substitute. He finally was moved to Buffalo Valley, a private treatment center in Hohenwald, Tenn., about 75 miles outside Nashville. By Nov. 11, he was clean.

"I always wanted to let them put me back on methadone, which they won't let you do in jail," Earle said. "I didn't think I could get off of methadone. This wasn't any new development. I was a junkie when I made 'Guitar Town' (his 1986 breakthrough album). I've been doing this since I was 13 years old. I just made my first record clean in my life."

Indeed, the uplifting sound of "Train a' Comin" will surprise the most devoted Earle fans. He surrounded himself with a buoyant bluegrass-oriented ensemble, including Norman Blake on dobro, fiddle and Hawaiian guitar; Roy Huskey on acoustic bass, and most notably, ex-Bill Monroe sideman Peter Rowan on mandolin. Although Blake contributes the soothing integrity on Bob Dylan's classic album "Nashville Skyline," Rowan is the heart of "Train a' Comin."

The album offers many highlights within its 13 songs, cut in five days in early January. "Mercenary Song," an original anthem that goes back to 1974, is sung with the subtle grit of singer-songwriter Guy Clark, whom Earle backed up on bass when he first hit Nashville in 1974. An irascible, hard-driving solo acoustic cover of the Beatles' "I'm Looking Through You" is more inventive than anything on the new Nashville-based "Come Together" tribute to the Fab Four. And the aching "Goodbye," one of Earle's newest ballads, is sung with a renewed spirit of clarity.

"I always wanted to make this record," said Earle, who used to tour acoustically in between his arena shows with his backup band, the Dukes.

"The original idea was to record songs that were written before I started making records. Then I decided I

wanted to do something around players I admired. Mandolin is probably my favorite instrument in the world. (He learned how to play it for 1988's "Copperhead Road" LP.) The whole project was a low-pressure situation, and frankly, it was a relief to know I could do it again."

The album's catalyst was producer William Alsobrook, whom Earle got to know in the mid-'70s when Alsobrook was house mixer at the Exit Inn in Nashville. Earle was the new folkie in Nashville, and he'd often catch sets by Doc Watson and Norman Blake there. Outside of family, Alsobrook was one of a handful of people who visited Earle in jail and rehab.

"Alsobrook, Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash were very, very supportive," Earle said. "I got a letter from Cash. Waylon sent word at every turn. I had to go to court even after I did treatment. The judge decided it would benefit me to do 19 more days in jail. I'm sitting in the tank for a whole day just to appear in court for 15 minutes. Waylon called and said to call him right away - through an officer of the court - if I needed anything. It was pretty amazing.

"He sent me a picture while I was in treatment. It was from a fair date he had done, and he had a bandanna around his wrist, which was always my deal. He's been great. The upside of this is that I know who my friends are.

"Alsobrook, I met when Jerry Jeff (Walker) was working on (1975's) 'Ridin' High'. Me and him and (songwriter) Kenny Buttrey got locked in the studio because everybody else was in the control room. They left, and we were kind of drunk. They locked the place up, turned the alarm on, and we didn't know how to turn it off. So we had to wait until the cleaning people came in. We got to know each other pretty well."

"Train a' Comin" was a one-shot deal; Earle's been without a label since 1991. But he's recording another album, produced in part by Bennett and Ray Kennedy, a Nashville-singer-songwriter who recorded the underrated "Guitar Man" (1992) album for Atlantic Records.

"The difference between this record and others I've made is that this one will be a lot sparser," Earle said. "Me, a bass player, a drummer and real carefully chosen overdubbing. There's one straight-up acoustic blues track called 'South Nashville Blues,' with just me on vocals and a resonator guitar. In retrospect, we did a lot with all those records that shook things up in Nashville. But you see what it's resulted in," he said referring to the pop country that's the standard today in Music City. "In the long run, all we did was make the drums louder."

Earle stopped in silence to gather his thoughts.

"I was sort of a target in Nashville," he said. "There's a lot of people around here who always supported what I was doing, but basically, they watched what I did, and if I got my ass shot off, they knew not to do that. Still, I knew I got to the point where I was ready to make the next record. But I wasn't writing, recording or anything. It was the last thing to go before the lights went out."

July 11, 1993—

Steve Earle is a visionary symbol of the New Traditionalist movement in country music. Consistently remaining true to the working-class milieu, Earle has fearlessly explored a world of crunchy guitars, aching vocals and poignant lyricism.

Between 1986 and 1990, Earle made country records that deeply influenced rock and rock records that affected country. Many called him the country Bruce Springsteen. Everybody liked Steve Earle.

Steve Earle didn't like himself.

Earle, 37, is a creature of reinvention. He's written short stories, dug swimming pools, collected motorcycles

and part-owned a dirt-track race car. The last of the fearless hearts, Earle has been married five times.

"The Hard Way," released in 1990, was Earle's last studio record. The leadoff track is a cresting anthem called "The Other Kind," in which Earle questions: *"I woke up this morning and I took a look around at all that I got/These days I've been looking in the mirror and wondering if that's me lookin' back or not . . ."*

In country music's most promising event of 1993, Earle performs for the first time in three years this week at Schubas. Chicago's always been a bastion of artistic and emotional support for Earle. Fans include WLUP's Steve Dahl and artist Tony Fitzpatrick. WXRT-FM (93.1) has consistently supported Earle. The four Schubas shows sold out in one day.

Earle has spent the past three years in a mysterious vaporization. The cryptic spin began after the 1989 release of "Copperhead Road," a quixotic project that mixed a lyrical folk tradition with hard rock and eclectic Irish influences such as the Pogues, who guested on the record.

"Copperhead Road" was released on Uni Records, a New York-based rock label MCA resurrected from the 1960s (Neil Diamond, Strawberry Alarm Clock). Less than two weeks after "Copperhead Road" came out, Uni went under. MCA since cleaned house on Earle, releasing a live album in 1991, "Shut Up and Die Like an Aviator," and this year's compilation, "The Essential Steve Earle." That superb overview of Earle's MCA output was promoted like a Van Morrison record - no picture, no bio, no buzz. Earle is persona non grata at MCA. He is currently without a record deal.

After the Uni disaster, Earle went through two divorces, left Nashville for Los Angeles (his fifth wife was Teresa Ensenat, the Los Angeles-based Geffen artist and repertoire representative who discovered Guns N' Roses) only to return to Nashville, where rumors of serious substance abuse ran rampant. Although Earle isn't talking, last week his new manager did say that in January, Earle's weight dropped to 125 pounds.

One of Earle's last televised appearances was on "The Texas Connection," taped in August, 1991, with country singer Jerry Jeff Walker. Looking pale and blown out, Earle's gruff tenor was defined by a vacant gnarl. He sang an unrecorded composition: *"Cocaine cannot kill my pain, cocaine cannot kill my pain/Like a freight train through my vein/. . . Now, whiskey has no hold on me, whiskey has no hold on me/Left those chains in Tennessee/. . . Heroin's the only thing, heroin's the only thing/The one gift that you can't bring."* Walker looked a little shook up. He only sang about sangria wine.

For Earle, this is the Comeback Road.

Appearing solo acoustic this week, Earle will play his best-known material, mixed with a few new songs his manager describes as "thematically and sonically somewhere between (his 1986 landmark debut) 'Guitar Town' and 'Copperhead Road.' "

Formerly Earle's agent at the William Morris agency, John Dotson of Nashville has been Earle's manager for the past two months. He said the 6-foot Earle is up to 165 pounds and is writing new material. Earle typically writes songs, makes demos and then plays the new material in public. This way the songs have gone through an evolutionary process before he enters the studio.

The minimalist approach symbolizes a full circle for Earle. He was born in rural Texas and his father was an air-traffic controller who was often transferred around the San Antonio area. Earle ran away from home at age 14 to follow singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt through Texas. Earle has said that while his family wasn't poor, they couldn't afford an electric guitar, which accounted for his hard picking on acoustic guitar. On the "Texas Connection" taping, Earle bragged about being the "loudest strummer in folk music."

Earle never let up.

Earle was signed by CBS in 1983, where he made one neo-rockabilly album. In 1986, Earle inked a seven-record deal with MCA. Not only did his recordings celebrate rock (and later metal) elements, but he further

confused audiences by opening for acts as diverse as the Replacements, Bob Dylan and George Jones. Almost tweaking the wishes of his record company, Earle would play rock 'n' roll clubs like the Roxy in Los Angeles at the same time Dwight Yoakam was being showcased at the more rootsy Palomino.

"What I am doing is patently country," Earle told me in a July, 1986, interview. "But at the same time it may be rock. There's a lot of technology now that can be used to make the message more powerful. But the main point is the song, and great country music's main point is always the song."

The basis of Earle's brilliance has been how he has lived the song, much like wounded legends Hank Williams Sr. and Merle Haggard. But after a turbulent three years, Earle may have learned how to distance himself. Every song does not have to be an exorcism; he doesn't have to be in the eye of every storm. Some songwriters cannot do that, but the boundless scope of Steve Earle says he can.