

# Lonesome Dove

## STEVE EARLE'S NASHVILLE SKYLINE

"Ring Steve Earle," said the message. "Area code 615..." That number has a romantic ring to it, like cruising Sunset or taking the A train.

Area code 615 is the prefix for Nashville, immortalised when the town's top session players used it as a band name. Nashville is the Mecca of country music, with many of the best — and worst — musicians feeling the romantic pull of "Music City USA." Among them are Steve Earle, battling the country establishment with songs that owe as much to Springsteen and Mellencamp as Hank and Lefty.

One of the young turks of new country, Earle has the longest track record. Like a character out of Robert Altman's patronising parody *Nashville*, he was drawn to the town as an aspirant songwriter in his teens. But instead of falling in with the

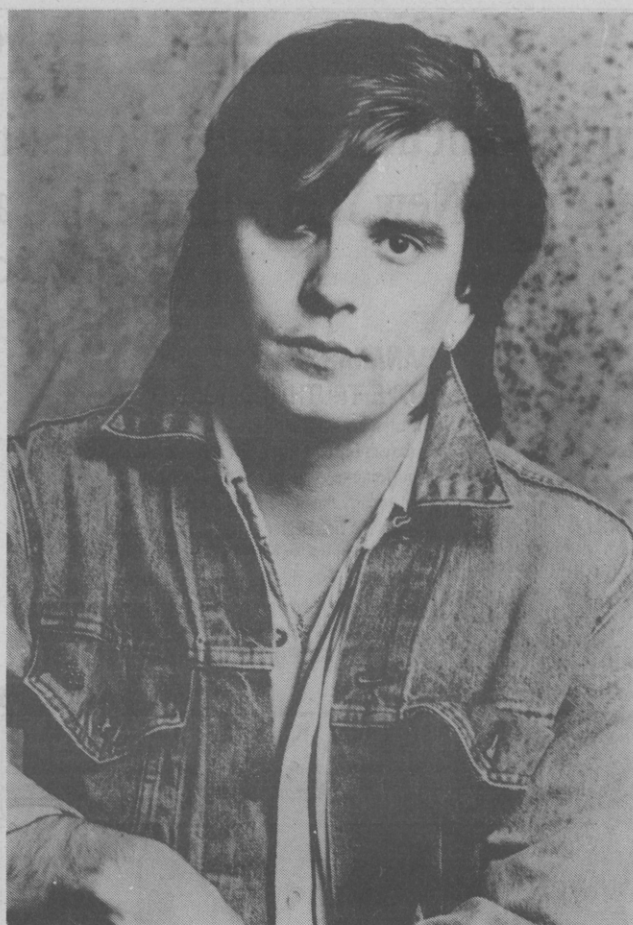
purveyors of countrypolitan schlock, he hung out with the 70s' most respected songwriters, fellow Texans Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt. "I'm more of the last of that wave than a newcomer," he told *RIU* last year. "I was the kid of that group, but I must have been passed out or drunk when they handed out the record deals!"

Now 34, since the mid-80s Earle has been making up for lost time. Since his 1986 debut *Guitar Town*, Earle has pushed his music further than his conservative contemporaries Randy Travis and Dwight Yoakam. Earle's latest album *Copperhead Road*, ranges from stadium rock to traditional bluegrass, even incorporating some Celtic folk with the assistance of the Pogues. Earle's aiming his country-influenced sound at the rock audience, a decision emphasised by his shift from MCA Nashville to its subsidiary in New York. "This record would have stayed the same if I'd stayed with

MCA Nashville," he explains, "Uni's designed to be a more edgier rock label than MCA, whose forte is stuff like Tiffany."

"I knew I was going to have to crack rock radio. You gotta get played on the radio somewhere, that's the whole deal. You're constantly trying to balance marketing and politics against art. You have to find a way to come up with money to make the record, but the deal with me is, not to let people with the money dictate to me musically."

Earle says the title track, with its bagpipes and mandolin, is the core of the album, and the most representative of his current sound. "I feel people who don't listen to country music aren't going to be put off by it. But in lots of ways *Copperhead Road* has the most traditional things I've ever done. If you took bluegrass instrumentals you



records, and the Fairlight 3 on 'Copperhead Road.' People shouldn't be afraid of the new technology. You can preserve old instruments and old forms, and should, but at the same time you have to look to the future."

Nashville has always suffered from the conservatism of the country music establishment — which is why the young bucks of the 80s made such an impact — but when it comes to digital recording, "Nashville's way ahead of New York and L.A.," says Earle. "I produced the Bible in London, produced Charlie Sexton and got chance to record in L.A. And I saw a lot of things went wrong with what they do, things I'd rather do as we do in Nashville. We cut the Bible live, and in England now you set up a drum kit in the studio and hell, people think you're cutting *Sgt Pepper* or something. The majority of engineers considered to be hot over there can't even record a sound out of the air anymore, it's all Midi."

"But at the same time, we need to open up to things around here. We were all under the impression that we would change things more than we have. A lot of young turks in Nashville were just about dislocating their shoulders patting themselves on the back about how much we'd changed things in such a short time."

"But then the dust settled and the guy who came out on top of the three of us — Randy Travis, Dwight Yoakam and me — was Randy. He's the one that went platinum. He was the mainstream, doing the most conventional music. We changed things a little, which is good — but now it's time to go back to work."

When Earle first arrived in Nashville in the mid 70s, he was fortunate to mix with and learn from two of country's finest contemporary songwriters, Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt. Earle played bass in Clark's band and sang backing vocals on his classic *Old No 7*. Clark, who tours New Zealand in February, introduced Earle to Van Zandt, who

could make a real straight hillbilly record out of it."

Despite the big rock punch of many of the tracks, *Copperhead Road* reflects Earle's passion for traditional music. His fascination for the way Celtic music developed into country led to his enlisting the Pogues to play on a couple of tracks. "The Pogues are real important for the same reason Los Lobos are important. Both David Hidalgo and Terry Woods have expressed the same thing to me — the kids are getting interested in traditional instruments again."

"I'm from San Antonio where Los Lobos' brand of Mexican music comes from — it's more from South Texas than California. There was a

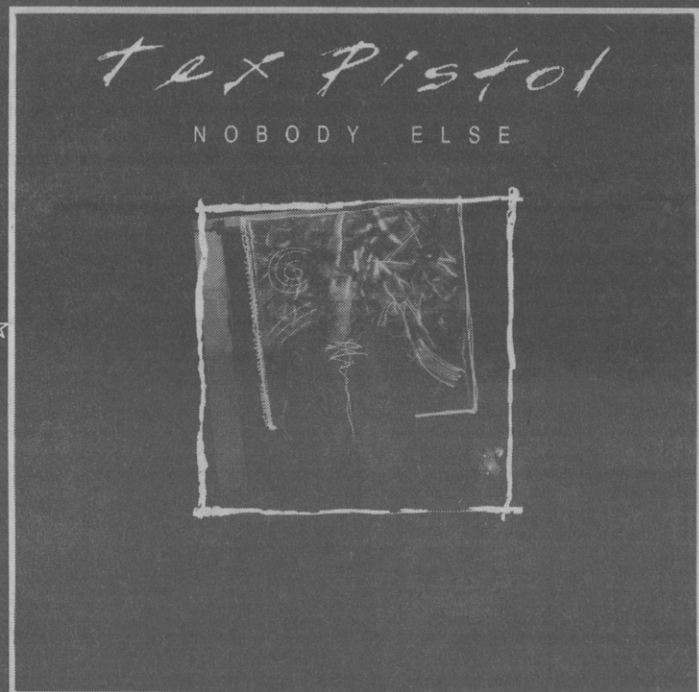
real concern that all the kids wanted to do was play electric guitar and keyboards. San Antonio is a big heavy metal town, most of the Chicano kids are into heavy metal, and people were worried that the baja sexto and the accordion were going to die. But Los Lobos made it hip again. By the same token Terry Woods was getting calls from kids in Dublin wanting cittern lessons."

"I'm far from being totally purist about it, that can be just as damaging. To me the best way to preserve the old instruments is to find out what their limits are and combine them with newer forms."

Earle is no Luddite when it comes to technology. "I believe in digital recording, I use Midi stuff on my

Debut album/cassette/CD (extra tracks)

# TEX PISTOL



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featuring:

"THE GAME OF LOVE",  
 "NOBODY ELSE" (with Rikki Morris),  
 "THE BALLAD OF BUCKSKIN BOB",  
 "HANDS OF MY HEART" (a cover of the Warratahs song),  
 "WINTER" and "SITTING IN THE RAIN".

"... moves like a Voodoo Queen's pelvis."  
 — Man overheard in bus queue

"... Everything here is done with soulful, gutsy flair..."  
 — Colin Hogg (Ak Star)

"... it's f\*\*\*ing good mate!"  
 — Rikki Morris (Gluepot)

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