

# Friends discover rock's future at 9:30

Late Saturday night, in a little Washington dive called The 9:30 Club, I caught Steve Earle in concert. That may mean little to you. But to me it means I saw America's best new rocker — someone who has a real sense of the value of honesty in music, someone who knows what lyrics are supposed to be all about. I saw someone with a sense of where American music should be going.

Playing to maybe 150 people, on a little stage in a sweaty and crowded atmosphere, Earle rocked the house. He delivered a performance of such integrity and vitality that if he had played for another three hours, I don't think anyone would have minded.

I was up in D.C. with a fellow Daily Tar Heel comrade. We were actually staying outside of Baltimore but had cruised into Washington that afternoon with U2 and The Who blaring from the speakers. We hooked up with a friend of this friend, a student at George Washington

## James Surowiecki

### Bands

University who also happened to be named George.

George was into the progressive music scene and had seen the cow punk band the Beat Farmers the night before at the 9:30 Club. He told us how the lead singer of the band had leaned over the stage and grabbed his head as he stood near the stage. "It was one of the top five shows I've seen," he said. He also told us that the Rainmakers and Steve Earle were playing the club that night.

I was less than enthused. I'd heard a couple of songs by the Rainmakers, but they didn't seem like anything special, outside of the fact that their music is anti-welfare state, if you can imagine that. Besides, the drive back to Baltimore was going to be a bitch,

and who the hell was Steve Earle, anyway?

We did, however, end up going. Live music is always intense, and the prospect of seeing it in a small D.C. club had a warped kind of charm. The show was supposed to start at 9:30 p.m. We got on the Metro and got there at 9:45. The Rainmakers hadn't gone on yet, but a long line stretched down a corridor with ugly bleached white walls.

The line was made up of a strange conglomeration of people, who ranged from the punkers with their multicolored, spiked hair, to couples in their early 40s, to the frat rats with their sickeningly conformist white shirts, Duck Head pants and obligatory sunglasses at night.

By the time we got in, after having passed a building directory that included the strange bedfellows of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Association and the Washington Review of Books, the Rainmakers were already on stage. We stayed in the back of the club as they ripped through "Government Cheese" and "Drinking on the Job," pointedly avoiding the bar after a harrowing experience earlier that day when we had been charged nine dollars for two Beck's and a Coors.

We moved toward the front of the stage as they cruised through "Let My People Go-Go," a song that has the curious line, spoken by God, of "I meant for you to love one another/ and to get out and have a good time." The people in the club seemed to be doing just that.

Fifteen minutes after the Rainmakers finished, Earle came on. Dressed in a white V-necked T-shirt and faded blue jeans, his long, straggly brown hair was already plastered to his scalp by the heat of the room. He sported an earring in

one ear and a necklace with a cross around his neck and carried an acoustic guitar in his left hand. Another Springsteen/Mellencamp imitation, I immediately thought.

Earle introduced himself and then launched into the loud, rocking "Guitar Town," which also happens to be the name of his first album. His voice and music had a peculiar country twang, something deeper than mere rockabilly. His style and his lyrics signaled a powerful respect for the tradition of country music.

After crunching through two more songs, he told us, "You folks don't know what you've got yourselves into. What you have here is a real hillbilly. I've survived the full moon in New York City (where he opened for the Replacements) and the van breaking down on the highway." He then launched into "Hillbilly Highway," a sentimental and yet evocative look at the road. It was this tune, a clear tribute to the music of Hank Williams and others like him, that showed he wasn't kidding when he said, "I'm really a country singer."

Halfway through his next song, "Good Ol' Boy," as Earle sang, "Just my luck/ I was born in the land of plenty/ Now there ain't enough," it dawned on me that something special was on the stage that I couldn't afford to miss.

With "My Old Friend The Blues," Earle captured magnificently, in a slow, bluesy tone, the solace music offers when loneliness overtakes us. "Lovers leave and friends will let you down/ But you're the only sure thing that I've found/ My old friend, the blues."

In "Someday," he spoke of the desire to escape from the doldrums of smalltown life with the words, "I got me a '67 Chevy, she's low and sleek and black/ Someday I'll put her on that interstate and never look back."

Earle's lyrics vibrate with intensity, with a real sense of life, more as it is than as it should be. They were autobiographical without being maudlin or self-indulgent. His music seemed to walk the tightrope between country and rock with complete ease. It bounced between the two extremes but never strayed from his roots, from the fusion of those two strains of American music that began so

close together and have drifted so far apart.

It wasn't just his songs, though. There was something more, something I had seen only when the Boss played. Earle projected an indefinable sense of honesty. Maybe it was the way he fixed on people in the crowd. When he caught your gaze, he held it, and it was obvious he meant what he said.

Major league scouts, when they're talking about a top prospect and trying to explain why they think he has a chance to make it, say he has a "good face." What they mean is he has guts and desire and all the ingredients that make someone real. Steve Earle had a good face. He had integrity, and everyone in the club knew it.

The song that made everything come together was his magnificent and fiery cover of Springsteen's "State Trooper." Earle led into it by saying, "This is a song by a pretty good hillbilly singer from New Jersey in his own right." He then delivered a version that was, if anything, superior to Springsteen's, a version that at once was a tribute and at the same time a means of liberating himself from Springsteen's inevitable shadow.

Earle's lead guitarist threw in plaintive blues licks that contrasted beautifully with the steady twang of the acoustic guitar. Earle's voice seemed ready to burst free of its laryngeal constraints as he screamed the lyrics "Radio jammed up to talk show station/ just talk, talk, talk, talk/ 'till you lose your patience." It was a stunning performance.

From then on, he had the audience. I thought his introduction to the song "Fearless Heart" was particularly revealing. "In a life as tough as this one, you have two choices. You can either get through it or you can live it. And if you want to live it you need two things," he said. I was fully expecting him to say something like you need a good woman and a fast car, or you need sex and rock and roll; and someone in the back of the room kept yelling, "Cocaine and cocaine!" But instead he said, "You need an inquisitive mind and a fearless heart." That was right on the money.

Including the two songs Earle did as an encore, 17 tunes comprised his set. It should have been twice as long. And as the last plaintive chords of "Down the Road" died out, and he wailed, "If it ain't here, it's down the road/ Keep on looking down the road," I realized I had gotten a sneak preview of greatness. I just smiled.

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