



## STEVE EARLE

# WASHINGTON SQUARE SERENADE

### BIOGRAPHY

“The city hasn’t changed as much as real estate agents would have you believe,” Steve Earle explains about his adopted hometown of New York City. “Specifically, my neighborhood hasn’t changed that much. I point people in the right direction so that they can take their picture like the cover of *Freewheelin’* all the time.”

That’s easy enough for Earle these days, because he and his wife, singer-songwriter Allison Moorer, now live on the very Greenwich Village street on which the famous cover shot for *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (1962) was taken. In that photo, Dylan and his then-girlfriend Suze Rotolo huddle against the cold as they walk along a snowy New York street. It’s an indelible romantic image that captures the idealism of the folk revival that was gathering momentum in New York at the time.

Steve Earle’s gripping new album, *Washington Square Serenade*, is a loving tribute to that era, that movement, that music and the city that gave them all a nurturing home. “That period changed pop music,” Earle says. “It made lyrics much more important. Rock & roll could have become a subgenre of pop if it hadn’t been for that literary aspect, which completely came out of a four-block area in New York City in one brief instant of time.”

Like *Freewheelin’* itself, *Serenade* is an album that combines songs of love and protest, a stirring chronicle of both the connections between people that make life worth living and the things that must be changed in order to make such connections more possible for everyone. “I knew it was going to be pretty personal,” Earle says about the album, which he recorded at Electric Lady Studios, the famed Greenwich Village recording complex that Jimi Hendrix built in the late Sixties. “The best part of my personal life was going so well I knew that chick songs were going to be no problem. As for political songs, I don’t think I’ve ever made an apolitical record. The last two before this [*The Revolution Starts ... Now* (2004), *Jerusalem* (2002)] were overtly political, and unapologetically so. This one is unapologetically personal.”

*Washington Square Serenade* opens with “Tennessee Blues,” which updates the title track of Earle’s 1986 debut album, *Guitar Town* – and establishes the sense of another fresh start. The new version is acoustic, more introspective and more rhythmically charged – all traits highly appropriate for the tale of an artist “bound for New York City” and leaving Tennessee behind. “It’s continuing a narrative – the state of me,” Earle explains.

The “chick songs,” as Earle describes them in apt period slang, include the lovely “Sparkle and Shine,” which echoes both early Dylan and the Beatles, and “Days Aren’t Long Enough,” which Earle co-wrote and sings with Moorer. “I’ve written duets for Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris, Iris DeMent and my sister Stacey, so there was no way I was going to get away with not writing a duet for me and Allison,” Earle says, laughing. “I had to – I’m married! But we’ve been singing together as long as we’ve been together, and I wanted something that was a love song about us.”

On the other end of Earle's passions, "Steve's Hammer," which the singer dedicates to Pete Seeger, is an uplifting political anthem, a statement of Earle's conviction about the role that music can play in achieving social justice. "One of these days I'm gonna lay this hammer down/Leave my burden restin' on the ground," he declares, and then makes clear when and only when that day will come: "When the air don't choke you, and the ocean's clean/And the kids don't die for gasoline."

As we all know, that time has not yet arrived, and "City of Immigrants" makes that point forcefully. A paean to New York's long history of welcoming people from other countries, the song had a very specific inspiration for Earle. "I knew I wanted to write a 'Fuck Lou Dobbs' song," he says about the CNN anchor who has defined anti-immigration politics as his signature issue. "There's no excuse for it – it's ugly and it's racist." Supporting Earle on the song is Forro in the Dark, the super-charged neo-folk Brazilian band that's based in New York.

*Washington Square Serenade* concludes with Earle's scarifying version of Tom Waits' "Way Down in the Hole," which will serve as the theme for the next season of the HBO series "The Wire." Earle has a recurring role on the show – "I play a redneck recovering addict, so it's not acting," he deadpans.

"It's daunting to cover a Tom Waits song – he's one of the best of my generation of songwriters," Earle admits. "But, then, I once sang 'Nebraska' to an audience that I knew Bruce Springsteen was in. It's not that stuff like that doesn't scare me – it's just that doesn't mean I won't do it!"

Overall, *Serenade* is imbued with a deeply intimate feel, because all of its concerns, public as well as private, are essential to who Steve Earle is. That intensely personal quality, however, is deftly complemented – both underscored and unsettled -- by John King's production. As one half of the Dust Brothers, King has worked with the likes of Beck and the Beastie Boys. As a result, rhythms continually percolate, bump and simmer beneath the largely acoustic instrumentation, fashioning a folk/hip-hop hybrid that sonically unites two of New York's finest musical traditions.

Asked how he would like listeners to respond to *Washington Square Serenade*, Earle, characteristically, is ready with a bold answer. "If you feel like you don't know what America is all about right now, and you want to reorient yourself to what America *should* be about, it's a really good time to come to New York City," he says. "I needed really badly at this point in my life to see a mixed-race, same-sex couple holding hands in my own neighborhood. It makes me feel safer."

"I've been pretty heartbroken about the way things have gone politically in this country the last few years, and I seriously considered moving someplace else," he concludes. "Then I figured out that I didn't have to leave the country. All I had to do was come to New York."

*Washington Square Serenade* – in its commitment, its values, its musical intelligence, its beauty and, finally, its very American optimism about the possibilities for a better world – demonstrates why.

- Anthony DeCurtis