

Steve Earle's 'On Top of the World' at Dallas' Granada Theater

Written by By LUIS NOBLE, News-Telegram Staff Photographer
Monday, 30 April 2012 09:45



If Steve Earle's reputation as one of Texas' music legends didn't precede him, you would know it from the first moment he took the stage. Earle, a Shertz native, was joined by The Mastersons and The Dukes for an electrifying show at Dallas' Granada Theater April 26.

Opening the show with "Waitin' on the Sky" and a few others from his 14th album, 2011's "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," Earle proved a man can go to hell and back and still be at the top of his game.

Earle rose to popularity in the mid 1980s, being mentored by the likes of Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, and releasing well-known albums like "Copperhead Road." Not long after, the singer began a battle with addiction to heroin. Following a stint in jail in 1992 and taking two years off touring, Earle emerged clean and with stories to tell. His comeback album, "Train A Comin'" was nominated for a Grammy in 1996. Earle's private life has also had its share of popular intrigue. He's been married seven times, twice to the same woman. Since 2005, however, he has been quietly settled into married life with musician Allison Moorer, who occasionally accompanies him on stage. Their child, John Henry, was born in early 2010.

His songs still tell his prodigal tale; "Most of time I would have said them days was gone/But, I'm given it another whirl," he sang in his opener, "Waitin' On The Sky." "Didn't know that I was gonna live this long/now, I am sitting on top of the world."

And that he is. His last two records, the politically charged "The Revolution Starts...Now" and his tribute to Townes Van Zandt, "Townes," both garnered Grammy Awards. "I'll Never" was also nominated for a Grammy.

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Opening band and married couple The Mastersons joined Earle's band The Dukes on this tour. Composed of Eleanor Whitmore and Chris Masterson, the multi-instrumentalist duo provides some serious backing for Earle's masterfully written songs. Playing as The Dukes that night were drummer Will Rigby, who has played with Earle since 1999, and Kelly Looney on bass, who was part of recording sessions on "Copperhead Road" in 1988 and performed vocals for that night's rendition of "Free Men."

More than 30 instruments lined the stage as Earle and his performers switched out for almost every song. Whitmore with her various fiddles, Masterson's steel guitar and electric guitars and Looney's basses – not to mention Earle's switching from acoustic guitar to banjos, then to a Lone Star-encrusted electric guitar and adding a harmonica here and there. The roadies have the instrument exchange down to an art. Not a second is wasted to get the right instrument in order.

After hitting some of the highlights of "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," Earle dipped into his expansive catalogue. He began the trail through his songwriting past with the energetic "Telephone Road," where he let the crowd sing the "c'mon, c'mon," chorus, and immediately after, the ballad "My Old Friend The Blues" from his 1986 debut, "Guitar Town." He introduced the songs with a story about rounding up enough cash with his friends to see a star-studded show featuring Willie Nelson and ZZ Top, among others. The price of admission, he recalled, was \$8. One of those friends lived on Telephone Road.

He later took the crowd to Appalachia with the one-two punch of his coal mining anthems "Harlan Man" and "The Mountain." The songs come from Earle's 1999 bluegrass album, "The Mountain," released with the bluegrass Del McCoury Band. In his introduction to the tracks, Earle said "Harlan Man" is a nostalgic reaction to the life of a coal miner, but "The Mountain," which would later become a single covered by the late Levon Helm on his album "Dirt Farmer," is a sober, somber retelling of the story.

The highlight of the performance, however, was Earle's first encore. He returned to the stage with his tribute to Townes Van Zandt, "Fort Worth Blues." The heartfelt performance reverberated through the crowd as he transitioned into the title track of his debut, "Guitar Town." He finished the encore with the thundering chorus of "Copperhead Road."

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So excited by the closer, the crowd in the Granada called for yet another encore, to which Steve Earle and The Dukes happily obliged. Encore number two consisted of a cover of ZZ Top's "Francine" and "It Takes a Lot To Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," a Bob Dylan cover, and his rock anthem to New York City from 1997's "El Corazon," "N.Y.C."

It was very fitting that he played a second encore, reminding everyone that despite all adversity Steve Earle is "sittin' on top of the world."