

## **One Man Blues Orchestra: Steve White**

By Andreas Schulz

[Translated from German by Joe Mersch]

You're not likely to forget Steve White. The man with the furrowed face, sunglasses and Basque cap delivers a blues-soaked original music performance of the highest caliber. During his time as a street musician he learned to sound like a entire orchestra--to blend guitar, harmonica, voice and foot percussion into a grooving whole.

It wouldn't do him justice simply to call him a blues-man. Actually, it's hard to find a typical twelve-bar shuffle with the familiar chord scheme in his repertoire. And yet White's music refers always back to the blues, without merely quoting them. He turns them inside out, twists them around, and comes thus to original songs in the blues spirit, but without the baggage of strictly maintained tradition.

It's impressive to see him onstage: an flawless musician who has realized his dream of a personal style; who sends his songs into the world with masterful right hand technique, an agile, raspy voice and an inescapable groove. He is also a pleasant fellow with an interesting biography and lively conversational style; a musician who has lived through the low points and is finally enjoying the chance to earn a living from music--the great dream of his teenage years.

### **Who is Steve White?**

I was born in New York City. My family moved to southeast Asia for professional reasons. I spent over ten years there from the age of seven, between 1957 and 1968. We lived in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Every two years we had a short stay in the US. That was my childhood. It was good to be exposed to all these impressions, but I attended 13 different schools before I could get my high school diploma. Looking back I realize that I never had the chance to make long-lasting friendships.

### **How did you start playing guitar?**

I started at age 13. My uncle was a bar musician. He was always telling me stories, and so it became my dream to be a musician. I started listening to music and discovered the blues. Radio was a catastrophe at the time. There was hardly any music that spoke to me. That changed later with Elvis and the Beatles. My most important experience was the music of Lightnin' Hopkins. After that I heard Bob Dylan's first album, and his sound with guitar and harmonica fascinated me.

### **What happened then—how did you establish contact with the professional music scene?**

I went to Canada for a semester and won a talent contest there. After that, some musicians in the area became aware of me, and I joined their band. I took a break from school and toured Canada with this combo as a slide guitarist. Three years later I went back to the US and started playing solo; I was 23 years old. It was a tough time—I had no money and no decent guitar. I hitchhiked to gigs and tried to survive. I was a street musician. Finally I settled in Cambridge, Boston, and started a club-duo with a friend.

When we didn't have enough gigs, we took jobs as gardeners, practically anything we could get, any lousy jobs.

**Were you already playing blues at that point?**

The repertoire of my Canadian band consisted solely of originals. It was very honed; we rehearsed 10 hours a day sometimes and had a repertoire of 300 songs. It was a great time, but my private life was difficult. My wife left me, and I had a tough time emotionally. With the return to the states I wanted to build a new life. The only job I could get in Los Angeles was with a demolition company—hard physical labor. I did that for the next 15 years. I kept trying to do music in coffee houses and small clubs. Music was still the dream, but it couldn't support me.

**And what then? You're a professional musician now, after all—who makes a living from music.**

I traveled the entire west coast, looking for work and playing small clubs for any imaginable occasion. My wife died in 1995, and I decided to drop all the day jobs and just do music. It was time to do that: music or nothing. And I had luck, I earned enough to live on.

**Did you have a record deal or a self-released project?**

No, I had no contract, no label, no promotion. Every year I made a cassette of new material, which I sold at my concerts. It was always a run of 300 copies—small potatoes—but I always sold out. It kept my dream alive. After 10 tapes I decided on my first CD production, which I completely financed myself. Later I was playing at an exhibition and a record producer heard me. He said, "I'd like to work with you and make a recording in a large studio. Don't worry about the money--just be on time and bring your guitar." One of my songs won a songwriting contest. That then brought me to a trade fair in Las Vegas. An amplifier company provided the equipment, and suddenly there was interest in my music. That was the starting point. Then I got into contact with Taylor Guitars, who I played for at the NAMM show. Then the people from AER heard me and brought me to the *Musikmesse* trade fair in Frankfurt. I was like a kid in a candy store.

**You play a Taylor—a prototype that was built for a new amplification system.**

Exactly—I play a Taylor with the ES pickup system. I was one of the Beta-testers and can work with it very well. My guitar has a cedar top and a rosewood body. I never liked the piezo sound, nor that of magnetic pickups. My Taylor sounds similar to a miked guitar. To be honest, I seldom play purely acoustic. Therefore the pickup system and the amp are as important as the guitar for me. I'm very satisfied with my AER amps.

**Can you describe your style as a guitarist?**

I play exclusively fingerstyle nowadays. That's the result of a long development; earlier I played only slide guitar. When I first heard percussion on guitar I was inspired and played "drums and strings" from then on. Meanwhile I've been tuning my guitar lower and lower and use especially heavy strings: 017 to 68. The sound is like a baritone guitar. Now I play in double drop D tuning (DADGBD), 5 half steps below standard; so

my lowest string is an A [*the tuning is AEADF#A –editor’s note*]. The string gauge compensates for the low tension. My style? I try to be a one man band. With the low tuning I can play bass lines, the footboard is my drummer, and my harmonica is the brass section.

**Is it hard to coordinate guitar, vocals, harmonica, and foot percussion?**

It was surprisingly easy. I always tapped my foot in rhythm. When I started to amplify it, I quickly saw the various possibilities and sounds and developed them further. It was much more difficult to coordinate the guitar and harmonica. It really took years for the guitar playing and the control of the harmonica and breathing to come together.

**Meanwhile you produce you own CDs.**

After I couldn’t get any more copies of the first one, I decided to handle everything myself. By that time I had enough money to pay for a good studio and could record at fairly little expense: my voice, the guitar, the harmonica, and the foot percussion I had been working on. When you do almost all first takes, you can record an album like that in a few hours. My idea is, I try to make as much noise as I can by myself (laughs). And I play almost all originals. I also do traditionals, but I’m not a jukebox. It’s not my job to play other people’s songs. My job is to write my own songs. It’s not about the money, it’s about my dream.

**Is that the description of your personal style?**

Sure! (laughs) I don’t chase the newest trends or copy people. I want to do my own thing, something recognizable. People who hear my music should say: “That’s Steve White. Nobody else can do that.” I want to do original and unmistakable work and not be a slave to supposedly new musical developments. If it sells, great—if not, I’ll still keep going. It’s real, it’s pure—no tricks, not even in the studio.

**You mentioned Lightnin’ Hopkins as an influence. Who else was important in your growth as a musician?**

As far as lyrics are concerned I’m a big fan of Leonard Cohen. He has a way of putting words together that’s unrivaled. He definitely influenced me—Bob Dylan and Jimmy Reed also.

**Your lyrics are not always about the traditional blues themes.**

That’s simple for me—I’ve experienced enough myself! And I want to be up to date. Many blues songs are about things that happened a long time ago. I don’t want to be a museum keeper or be desperately keeping the past alive. I want to bring the blues into the present. I talk about modern technology, the internet, current events; but my soul’s in it, of course, and the spirit of the blues. The blues is a living music. It should continue growing, rather than be limited and just look backward. Besides, if you play only traditional blues in a club the whole time, you bore people. So I use the blues as a basis. Most real blues artists had a broad repertoire and were more concerned with developing their music than with preserving the past. We’re always influenced by the culture of our times, and that should come into the music as well. Too many people are busy trying to recreate a worn out history. It’s almost a mummification. I’ve written many songs that

aren't blues, but are associated with them by the audience. That's the essence of the blues. I've never seen myself as a pure blues man. And yet I've had almost the archetypical biography. I've done the dirtiest jobs you can imagine. You talk about hard times--I've lived them. That's the foundation of what I am today, what I play and what I sing. And I'm always interested in further growth. I'm happy that I didn't give up. Now my dream has been fulfilled: I can make a living from music.

**Thanks very much for the interview.**

**Inset text with photo of the *Brand New World* CD:**

[Steve White is a "one take guy." All the tracks on *Brand New World* are first takes and sound as direct, genuine and unfalsified as a live performance. White's music is raw, but not without elegance, and above all powerfully driving. It would be hard to find a pigeonhole that fits exactly. Blues? Yes, but without false reverence and with a good helping of grooving funk riffs. Steve White has simply defined an individual style that lifts him out of the mainstream. His playing on the low tuned Taylor is accomplished, but not such that technique becomes the focus. It's not until you try to follow all the voices and rhythmic nuances that you discover his complex polyphony. The songs? They tell stories of today--sometimes sad, sometimes funny, always full of wise observations about life. For further information: [www.stevewhiteblues.com](http://www.stevewhiteblues.com)]