

The One Man Band Steve White (Concerto Magazine, Austria)

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Translated from German by Joe Mersch

One man bands have a great tradition, especially in the blues. The concentration of voice, guitar, harmonica, and foot percussion in one person made it possible to offer the public more than just the usual solo performance and still be able to travel light. In the days of the hobo bluesmen, the latter was an economic necessity for traveling musicians. Nowadays this species of the 12-bar obsessed has largely died out, which lends the remaining ones a certain status as exotics.

Steve White is this type of exotic, in the best sense of the word. Born on March 14, 1950 in New York, the American grew up in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. White's grandmother was a classical violinist; his father, who worked for the US State Department, was also a writer and loved vaudeville and show tunes. "At the age of seven I resolved to devote myself to life, and to reflect it through music, writing and painting," White explains in his Concerto interview. This many-sidedness, no doubt influenced by the various cultural factors [of his upbringing], is one of the most fascinating aspects of the artist Steve White. "I just listened to everything—from classical Chinese music to Indian ragas to crossed radio signals. But basically I was more affected by how similar people are, rather than by their differences.

Impressed by a long list of singers—from Jimmy Rushing to Delbert McClinton or Perry Como, White especially values the ability to uncover the truth and timeless quality of a song. Songwriting thus has special significance. "Woody Guthrie once remarked that you can only write about what you know and can only sing about what you have yourself experienced. I think that's the essence of a songwriter's work. But aside from that, I also enjoy covering songs I like personally."

As is so often the case in the history of popular music, the guitar is the most fitting instrument (in both meanings) for the singer/songwriter. "The guitar and the music possible with it were always very personal for me. I always try to find my own individual way into it. I never took lessons, but was inspired by all the great contemporary guitar styles—flamenco, classical, jazz, blues, and folk. The guitar is a lifelong journey of discovery," enthuses the 55 year old musician.

Steve White's unusually distinct, multilayered and complex approach to the art world makes it seem almost inevitable that he should take the one man band route, even if his excellent album *House of Bones*, released at the turn of the millennium, was recorded with a top-notch studio band. "*House of Bones* was recorded as an acoustic solo record, and was then finished up with session musicians from L.A. and Nashville," he says. "It was originally planned as a double album, with solo as well as band tracks."

House of Bones perfectly reflects the sound cosmos of Steve White. The work starts with the intensively bluesy "Drop Down Mama," establishing the unmistakable Steve White trademark sound. The session musicians come in on the next track, Bob Dylan's "Highway 61," an unusually aggressive version with cutting slide and pumping bass.

The title song combines rock with Who-like staccato synths and soulful background vocals; “Hurry Evening” offers relaxed acoustic blues with piano underpinning, “Down with the Blues” a kind of jazz-infused, soulful blues-pop; “Delta Down” drifts deeply and earthily into the delta and is one of Steve White’s signature songs; “Old Friend” conjures New Orleans, while “Move on Down” brings Gospel into play.

Finally, *57 Miles from Mexico*, *Brand New World*, and “*Live from Budapest*” document beautifully the Steve White one man show of studio and stage, as does his first [sic] recording, “Better Days.” [All boast] expressive, rhythmically percussive and virtuosic solo guitar—in its full range from picking to slide and with marked bass emphasis; raw, evocative voice; spirited harp; and the relentless foot percussion he developed under the inspiration of John Hartford, with its “voodoo symphony of pings, plonks, and whacks” (John D’Agostino in the liner notes to *Brand New World*).

[One encounters] engaging lyrics, melodies accessible without being obvious, thorough—not just this, but that also—in the tradition of the folk, blues and singer-songwriter genres. White’s artistry is intended to entertain, certainly; but it often also invites the listener to reflection—in the lyrics as well as in the transitions between songs, as can be heard on *Live from Budapest*. The American doesn’t shy away from political statements, either; though without swinging a club of moral instruction. The apparently “simple” truths are often the most painful. “When you lose everything, all you have is your tears,” he says in relation to “Tears are All You Own.” That the blues is still capable of communicating social concerns appears inherent in his thinking. “I think that this is the only way the blues can stay important,” he says. “It’s part of the artist’s responsibility to maintain the link to reality.”

Steve White’s next album, on which he is currently working hard, will probably also be in this context. Additionally there will be extensive tours, which will bring him back to Europe in the Spring. Austria is also on the tour schedule, after his convincing performance at the Austrian Blues Masters Festival 2005 in Leibnitz. “My musical journey has taken me in many directions,” he says. I’m happy to be able to continue it.”