



Steve Wynn

by Fred Mills

Steve Wynn: Former leader of the late, great Dream Syndicate, whose epochal 1982 album *The Days Of Wine And Roses* is deemed by nine out of ten pundits to be an American classic? Prolific solo artist since 1990, whose 2001 album *Here Come The Miracles* – judging from its reviews – is seemingly destined for similar “classic” status? Frontman for The Miracle 3, also part of indie supergroup Gutterball, and occasional solo acoustic artist? Hardboiled short-story author and aspiring novelist? (See below...) All that and more – a veritable Renaissance Man, in fact.

Wynn’s latest album is called *Static Transmission*, available on his own Down There label via Blue Rose in Europe and DBK Works in the U.S. All the poop you need to know, from discographical info to Wynn’s frequent diary entries to exclusive mail-order only releases to free MP3 downloads, can be had at Wynn’s healthily maintained website,

www.stevewynn.net. So let’s dive straight into our conversation with the gentleman, conducted via phone from his New York apartment on May 15 and May 28 of this year. Trust me, he’s got a lot to say – not even counting his own storied legacy, he’s a walking, talking musical archive.

PT: Let’s go all the way back. What’s your recollection of the Dream Syndicate era from the point of view of a working, touring musician? Bands didn’t get rich, but there was a lot of artistic freedom.

SW: Well, the Dream Syndicate was kind of, you know, “against any club that would have us as a member.” And we appealed a lot to the local hardcore scene, which we were pretty flattered about. At the same time, we kind of faced that and started doing ten-minute songs which freaked ‘em out. We were there to conquer.

I remember when we first started touring, back in ‘82, ‘83, around that time – and I’ve heard the same thing from other bands like R.E.M. – it was really different because there wasn’t a circuit at first. Outside of New York or L.A. the best you could hope for was to come to each city and play their “New Wave night.” So the thing is, for all of us bands that were touring all the time, like the Dream Syndicate, R.E.M., Rain Parade, Sonic Youth, all the SST bands, Replacements, etc., there gradually became a circuit. And a really kind of enthusiastic, new, naïve, fan-driven, “commerce is secondary” kind of circuit that was really exciting.

Could you make a real living and come home with money in your pocket?

If you got a room at the Motel 6 and paid for a loaf of bread and some baloney to eat you could! [laughs] As it went on, it got better and better. There weren’t a lot of underground indie bands set up that way and touring like that – on curiosity and enthusiasm. Now, you can still do it, and I tour a lot, but there’s a lot more traffic coming through town. A lot more bands for people to decide on who they want to see each week.

Back then it was still fresh and exciting. You came to a town like where I lived, in North Carolina, and maybe all we had were the records at that point, so to see a west coast band like Dream Syndicate was really special.

Exactly. There weren’t a lot of opportunities for people to see this kind of music. It’s funny because it’s kind of come full circle now. I’ve actually been touring a lot more in the United States the last few years, and it seems like it’s become the same way again. Things have become so corporate – even underground music has all this corporate muscle and machinery behind it now – that it’s gone back to the point where people are championing the more obscure artists, or the people who aren’t as much in the public eye and who don’t have a lot of money and manpower behind them and thus are just getting in the van like the old days and touring. So we come to each town, whether it’s Buffalo or D.C. or Seattle or wherever, and there really is a lot of excitement like there was back in the older days.

I think a lot of people are getting

hungry for something more under the radar.

Sure. And further, among serious music heads, there’s a lot of mistrust that develops when you think you’re having music forced upon you. You’re told, “This is the hip new band this week!” [laughs] “You better like it too, because everybody else likes it!” That kind of burns you out. And that’s the fallout from the whole ‘90s alternative thing: suddenly, the music we thought was our own private, underground music that separated us from the mainstream became as corporate as Foreigner and .38 Special. It got confusing, so when there is a feeling that, “Okay, this is the real deal. This is music made by people who love to play and are gonna do it whether you come out or not,” I think that kind of draws in the people who truly love music.

It did feel like, after Nirvana *et al* went overground, it was like everything we’d worked for and dreamed about in the mid ‘80s was happening – to get some awareness about these bands, to see them sell records and earn a real living at music. Then all of a sudden it went sour. And nobody expected that.

Not at all. And I remember in ‘91, when Nirvana broke and all that stuff was happening, I remember thinking it was the dream come true. All this loud, distorted, feedback guitars is now the mainstream – “Hallelujah! The time has come for the music I love, and for my music as well!” Unfortunately, the result wasn’t more cool, daring and groundbreaking bands, but a lot of bands watering it down and making this music that was as bland as everything else. It got confusing for awhile and it burned a lot of people out.

The last few years, though, have gotten better. I can think of more records I hear now that excite me than in a long time. All you have to do is just start digging deeper and don’t just take the music scene and the music press at face value. Because if you look, it’s there, and you can find it now because of the Internet.

During the ‘90s as a solo artist you label-hopped a fair amount, from Rhino/RNA to Mute/Elektra to Zero Hour. Yet then we get to 2001, you revive your old Down There label [which issued the first Dream Syndicate record as well as records from Green On Red,

Naked Prey and others], going back to your indie roots so to speak, and you get the best reviews of your life practically, for *Here Come The Miracles*. It's not supposed to happen that way, is it?

You know, it was really gratifying, and even surprising, that happened for *Miracles*, which I financed and released myself. It was distributed by a two-man company, which I hired my guitarist to call retail in his spare time, all those things. And it was a record that sold better for me and got better reviews than anything I'd done

with the way the music biz, indie distribution, etc., is for you as an artist? Can you operate solidly at this level for the rest of your life?

I don't see why I couldn't. The records get out to all the stores, pretty much. Like, for the last record I completely believed in it so I was determined not to stop. I toured as much as I could, playing for a year and a half nonstop. Calling stores, visiting stores. I believed in it, and it takes a little more effort, but the end result is you actually do get the stuff out there.

And the thing was, even before I

So you own all your own masters? David Bowie, for example, owns his, but most artists don't.

I own them dating back to the Rhino records. And I've kind of lucked out, like when labels went by the wayside and I'd get back complete master rights. And the ones I didn't own outright, I paid to own them eventually anyway. It's a good thing to do, and you can't always do that. A lot of times you have to give up something to get signed. I'm in a good position. You asked before, can I keep doing this? And I think I can. I have enough of a following. The

wound up getting a song in *Beverly Hills Cop VII* or something! Blue Rose, my label in Germany, wants to do a box set. I'm kind of balking at that right now. Because fans who like my music tend to get *everything*, so what else is there to put out? I'm sure there's stuff I could dig up, but with each "real" release, there's usually a companion release of rarities, outtakes/radio broadcasts/live stuff, too.

I'm kind of more into doing a DVD, and I'm working on that now. A DVD of various live things, videos of the Dream Syndicate and from my own solo career. And I've got a closet full of really good footage from the last 20 years. Also, the *Weathered And Torn* Dream Syndicate live video will come out on DVD this fall. It's being remastered right now. I like that movie a lot because whenever somebody asks me why the Dream Syndicate broke up I can say, "Watch this movie. You'll see." It really shows the band breaking up, almost a real-time breakup.

When Rhino issued the expanded/remastered *Days Of Wine and Roses* in 2001 there was a huge outpouring of retrospective commentary on the band from critics. Do you think the Dream Syndicate accomplished what it set out to do?

Oh yeah. [*firmly*] Yeah. I'm really proud of what we did. When we formed, when we made our first record and started playing shows, we were only doing it because we were fans of this music, the music we were making, and no one else was doing it. We went out there playing, whatever you'd call it – "psychedelic garage" or "indie/underground noise," whatever – and we weren't seeing it anywhere. Now, the funny thing is, at the same time, other bands around the country were sort of doing the same thing, like Sonic Youth, Husker Du. But it was music we loved and we really took it out there and played it for people, and I think it just opened a lot of people's ears to some alternative at the time – to Duran Duran or Haircut 100 or whatever people thought was hip and groovy at the time. Wed just say, "Nahh. There's another darker, weirder, deeper, creepier side of underground music. Check *this* out!"

And then you get the "Velvet Underground Effect" kicking in: everyone who saw you play goes out and forms a band.



in years. Better than anything for a label in a gigantic midtown building with a huge staff and tons of money. I did better with my own little mom-and-pop thing. Which had a lot to do with the record itself, of course; I thought it was the best record I'd made in years – maybe ever. That didn't hurt. But also, I think it goes back to what we were saying earlier. There's a new enthusiasm from either fans or stores or the press to get behind somebody that was doing it himself. Whether it's financing yourself or releasing it yourself or touring behind it like a madman, I think it shows you're doing it because you love the music. If a label props you up and puts some money behind you, people think maybe I'm just a guy sitting at home out by the pool. I don't think I've ever done that!

So are you comfortable, then,

revived my label, I'd been financing my own records. Going back ten years now, to 1993. Starting with, I think the first Gutterball record [*Gutterball*] and then my *Fluorescent*, I just started putting out my own money – maxing out credit cards, borrowing money, playing whatever gigs I could possibly do to get enough money to make a record. Recording it, mixing it, mastering it, then bringing it to the label, whether I was on a label or looking for one, and saying, "This is my new record. You have two choices: yes or no. And either way, we'll be friends. But I'm not going to change it. I'm not going to remaster it or resequence it. This is the record. What's your choice?" Even with Zero Hour, who were ultimately paying for whatever promotion I got, I still made them on my own, kept it all hidden from them, and finished it and said, "Here it is."

only way I can screw that up is to make bad records, and I don't really plan on doing that.

What about archival and box sets? You've already done several rarities sets sold by mail order. And around '97 or '98 you actually did something very unusual for the CD *Advertisements For Myself*. You compiled your own anthology covering your entire career to date and spanning something like 6 or 7 labels total.

And very illegally, by the way! [*laughs*] Yeah, that was a promotional thing. I didn't sell them outside of the website so I didn't see any problem. The whole point to that collection was just to get the songs used in movies or TV or whatever. A&M, for example, couldn't get very upset if I

I think we did influence a lot of musicians. Maybe we didn't sell a million records – although I think eventually I will hit that, because 50,000 at a time, over 20 years... [laughs] You know, the level of enthusiasm, the love of the music per fan, per listener, per person who bought *Days* was probably as high as any band you could imagine. People really loved it. And I still meet people now, 20 years later, who say that record changed their life or they formed a band because of it or it opened their eyes to new things. And that's a great feeling. Sure, we were – whatever, musicians, artists, whatever you want to say. But we were just as much advocates for this music that excited us. And I think we had something to do with bridging the gap with what came before – the Stooges, the Velvets, the Modern Lovers, Big Star – and all the things that came afterwards – Yo La Tengo, Nirvana, bands like that.

Do you remember that old MTV show "I.R.S.' The Cutting Edge"? There was one segment that had Peter Buck looking directly into the camera: "It's your duty as Americans to go out and find this music..." And a lot of us did just that.

S: That's great. The thing is, I mean, lookit, 99% of record buyers are maybe never going to hear about what I do. But the other 1% are the kinds of music fans that I am. The kinds that I hang out with. Those are the kind of people I'm probably playing for anyway. And it's nice that, now and then with certain records or certain songs throughout my career, it breaks through to a little bit more of a mainstream audience. That's great, and I'm happy when that happens. But when I was 15, 16, 17, whatever, and really getting into music and thinking about forming bands, all the bands I loved were the underground bands. And if I would have looked ahead and envisioned a career for myself, it probably would have been the same one that I have. This is the kind of music that I love. I mean, I was more excited about the Only Ones than I was about, you know, Blondie. Even though Blondie's great! But I was more into the bands that nobody else knew about.

What inspired you to pick up a guitar?

Creedence Clearwater Revival

inspired me to pick it up — and Television inspired me not to put it down! I was eight years old at the time and I didn't know much about guitar tone or amplifiers or gear, stuff like that, but I just knew [Fogerty's] sound was really magical. For a kid growing up in LA it evoked a complete other world. Of course I had no idea of knowing he was just from up the road, in Oakland! [laughs] To me, it just sounded like something I'd never heard before, completely magical. I was eight at the time and it made me start playing guitar right away. I started with *Willy & The Poor Boys*, but within a year I had all the others. And you know, all those records came out within just a couple of years. Just coming out rapid fire. So I picked up everything – from the time I was eight to the time I turned 10 I must have gotten six of their records because they were coming out one after the other. *Cosmo's Factory*, *Willy & The Poor Boys*, *Green River* – all those records just completely made me want to play guitar.

You just mentioned Television too...

Ten years later or so when punk rock came along, I was getting ready to go into a life of being a sports writer or whatever else my college education had prepared me for. And punk rock in general, and *Marquee Moon* specifically, made me want to keep playing. And I was so inspired – at that point, well, punk rock was liberating enough in general. It gave you the feeling that even if you weren't a virtuoso, technically, or hadn't played a whole lot, you could still make music just from your own emotions, the love and excitement of being a music fan. So *Marquee Moon* in particular, I said to myself, "This is why I play guitar." It was something more than just playing licks and riffs and scales you'd learned – it was about using guitar as your mouthpiece, expressing yourself. It was an outsider weirdo record. Whereas the Sex Pistols were pretty much straight ahead – they weren't that far away from Aerosmith! But *Marquee Moon* was closer to Albert Ayler.

As a guitarist, then, what are some of your favourite all-time guitar hooks?

S: "Green River," in fact. "Cinnamon Girl," "Dirty Water," "I Can Only Give You Everything," and "Pride Of Man" by Quicksilver.

My favourite guitarists would kind of be the obvious ones: Neil Young, Tom Verlaine, Fogerty, and others you'd always see on lists. But you'd never see John Cipollina, and he's really one of my three or four favourite guitarists of all time. And it's hard to convince people how good he is because you have to get past a lot of bad songs and, often, some pretty bad jams, to get to how good he is. But you'd know it was his playing right away. I saw him one time, in '83 when we were making *Medicine Show*, in San Francisco. This really tiny club, and he played four sets – this three piece band from like nine until the morning. 15 people there. I just sat for all four sets and soaked it in. It was incredible.

From your list it seems like you're not into the, er, "cleanest" sounding riffs...

I guess not! I like trashy guitar. It's one of the things I love with garage music, or the Velvets, or Neil Young. It's all stuff where it's loud and distorted and fucked up. And that's the kind of guitar sound that I like. I think I've played all those songs at one point or another, too. But here's a funny story: "Green River" was the song I used for my audition into the Musician's Union in 1984. We [Dream Syndicate] were on A&M, and you had to be a member of the union. I don't know if it's still that way, but to be on a major label, because you have to pay union fees – major labels make you do that – and we'd signed to A&M. So we went down to the Local 47 on Vine Street in Hollywood and audition. Not just fill out a lot of paper, but actually audition, which was a crack-up! We go in there and there's all these guys who aspired to playing on Johnny Carson, *The Tonight Show* and I'm thinking, "Ah – heeere's 'Green River'!" I have no idea if you still have to do that. I kept paying my dues for three or four years and then kind of forgot about it. But I was proud of that! [laughs] I used to walk around saying, "Hi! Steve Wynn, Local 47..."

Dream Syndicate: There are some holes in the back catalog at the moment. I hear that Universal may do one of their 2-CD expanded/remastered "Deluxe Editions" for 1984's *Medicine Show*. What else?

Live At Raji's [1989], I think, is also going to be reissued, with a new version of *Ghost Stories* [1988] by

Ryko/Restless, maybe do a double pack of those. And with *Medicine Show*, well, I always had a funny thing about that record, because it was weird when it came out: it got slammed a little bit in the States, while overseas it was loved! It taught me early on not to take criticism that seriously, because in one time zone I'm being told I dropped the ball and in another time zone it's a masterpiece. So who are you gonna believe? Neither!

But I've been trying for over two years to get it reissued. It's been hard, probably because A&M kept being swallowed by companies. It's like *Apocalypse Now* and following a Col. Kurtz kind of trail upstream to find the rights to the record! But I think it's gonna happen because Universal now has the rights, and Sid Griffin from the Long Ryders, he's been doing a lot of liner notes and a lot of packages on reissues for Universal lately. So he feels he can get it done and can persuade them to put it out. I'd love for it to be remastered, because I don't think it was ever really mastered properly.

On to current matters. I'd like to know more about The Miracle 3 they get cover billing on the new CD, in fact. This is a real "band" now, I take it, as opposed to just "Steve Wynn with his backing crew..."

Linda Pitmon [drums] and I have been playing together for seven years. She joined the band for the *Melting In the Dark* tour – she previously played with ZuZu's Petals and has also worked with Amy Rigby, Freedy Johnston and Marty Willson-Piper. Dave DeCastro [bass] joined the band in 1999 for the *My Midnight* tour and had previously played with Health and Happiness Show, Butch Hancock and Amy Rigby. Jason Victor was the rookie in 2001 when he joined up for the *Here Come the Miracles* tour but has since played 200 shows with me and he now plays with Mary McBride as well. He joined right after *Miracles* came out; Chris Brokaw was on that album and wanted to tour with me, but my tours are so long and was doing so much different stuff, his own thing, at the time still doing Come, and stuff with Evan Dando, Pullman, etc. Jason was the perfect choice: he was dying to go on tour, didn't have a job, and didn't have a girlfriend!

And Chris Cacavas plays on the album and did part of the

European tour as well?

Yeah, for about ten days in Germany and then the last week in the UK. He lives over there now, in Germany. He's got his own career and he's busy producing bands over there now too, so I'm glad when I can have him because he's great. I'm mystified that he hasn't approached anything more than cult level in the States because he's just fantastic, amazing.

For *Static Transmission* You returned to the scene of the crime, Tucson, where you recorded *Here Come The Miracles*. Why Tucson in the first place, and is this *Miracles Pt. II*?

Aside from the fact that *Miracles* was my favourite record I've ever made and I was so happy with it, I also had a great time making it. The results and the process. I went back to Tucson because it worked so well the first time, then. I thought why not? There was no reason not to. I liked the studio, Wavelab, I liked [studio operator] Craig Schumacher, I liked the people I worked with. Craig in particular — he has quite a bit to do with those Calexico and Giant Sand records, Barbara Manning.

So for *Static Transmission*, this would be the first time, for me, where I said I wanted to do the same thing again. Which I never do! All the way back to *Medicine Show*, I would make a point to make the new record different from the one before, whether it was playing with different people, or going to a different place, or having a different style of songwriting. I've always been a big fan of people like Neil Young or Bob Dylan, or even the Beatles and Stones who, in their heyday each record would be a brand new event. But... just because it was such a good way of working there, and because Tucson is so different from either New York or L.A., where I've spent my entire life so far. I've made most of my records in big cities, and I knew that before I made *Miracles* I wanted to go someplace different, to something that wasn't going to be a big city or have the same process as I'd done before. [Giant Sand's] Howe Gelb told me, "You gotta come out to Tucson. You'll love it." The price was right — cheaper to spend 10 days in Tucson, including hotels and air fare, than 4 days in a New York studio. I figured why not, the worst that can happen is that it's an experiment that didn't take off and I've got some B-sides. But it was great. You know how it is out there.

Things are slow. You can't force time out there.

So the thing is, we went out to make *Static Transmission* to get more of the same — and I should know better. We all should know better! It was two years later; a lot had happened in that we'd made a record we'd have to live up to. After a couple of days we said, okay, we can't make it the same way. It has to be a different record, a different experience. And it really is. I can hear some of the similarities in sounds, in the players and some of the styles. But they're very different records at the same time.

Did you feel like you were up against "the artistic monolith" that *Miracles* might have represented in your mind?

Yeah, maybe a little. I was nervous for awhile. Just because I was so happy with that record. I like everything I've done, and there's probably 5 or 6 records that I wouldn't change a thing. That was definitely one of them. That's a good feeling when you walk out of the studio and say, "That's exactly the record I want to hear right now." So yeah, it was a bit of a challenge, a little pressure on myself to go back there. But it worked out just fine.

Let's talk about some of the new songs. The album seems to have a more reflective tone than *Miracles*. Is there any overriding theme in that regard? I've read your essay posted on your website about 9/11 too, so I wondered if, like so many artists have commented, you saw things "differently" after 9/11 and that was reflected in your songwriting?

Yeah, it would be hard to *not* be influenced by 9/11, especially as a Manhattan resident and while I didn't go the Springsteen route and write specifically about the events and the aftermath, I think that the new record is influenced by the panic, fear, melancholy, uncertainty, defiance, mood swings and emotional oblivion that followed the events of that day.

So yes, it's a more melancholy record. And in some ways a sweeter, more peaceful record — but also kind of a little disturbed at the same time. I'm a big freak about sequencing: you can take the same 12 songs and put them in a different order, aside from the hidden track, and have a completely different record. I started with "What Comes After," a very calm-at-the-far-end-of-the-storm kind of song, a ballad. That sets the

tone, and I finish it with "A Fond Farewell," a peaceful, walking-into-the-light thing. A friend of mine called it "troubled soul music." [laughs] I kind of like that. I've been calling it that lately because it suits the record. The whole thing is, you know, "Lord I've seen troubles and I'm gonna my salvation" kind of record. Looking from a period of darkness and trying to find your way out. The songs all handle that in different ways. Like, "Maybe Tomorrow," which pretty much says there is no way out. And the songs "Amphetamine" and "What Comes After" say I'm gonna break through this ugliness, this darkness.

"Keep It Clean," with the creepy vibe, the half-spoken vocal and sound effects, is one of my favourites. Kind of a Bad Seeds thing going on. And the character himself is a junkie type. You also used a low-life type character in your short story "Looked A Lot Like Che Guevara" [in the recent Greg Kihn-edited fiction anthology *Carved In Rock*]. Are you at home examining those types of personas, hustlers, on-the-edge types?

Yeah, and I've written about that many times. Temptation, facing whatever your personal darkness is, your Achilles heel that's gonna drag you into the muck. Facing that and probably resisting it — but it's an issue I've come back to again and again. I wrote the song thinking it's about somebody who honestly is trying to keep it clean and probably will get through it. [laughs] Linda said to me, "That guy's messed up. That guy's a creep! He hasn't a chance in the world."

Not that I'm, you know, a sleazeball, somebody that needs to be kept a hundred miles from any right minded citizen. But I've got all the ugliness, meanness, darkness and sleaziness inside me like anybody else does! Some have it .01 percent of their DNA and others 99 percent, but everyone has it, and you keep certain things at bay, things you don't like about yourself you keep at bay in different ways. So by writing, you can just hone in on that very tiny part of yourself. It's probably even easier to write about it when it isn't a huge part of yourself, because if you're actually on the edge of just losing it all and being a total wreck it might be harder to write about it. I mean, most of the stuff I write is pretty dark and miserable....

Pelecanos-esque, perhaps? Very economical, minimalist but wrenching the most out of every word. I'm even thinking of a great pull quote for a piece on you: "Hard-boiled rocker Steve Wynn returns to the scene of the crime with *Static Transmission*...." I mean, that kind of verbiage works when folks are describing [crime fiction writer, and Wynn friend] George Pelecanos, right?

That sounds good — but I wonder if I was violating some kind of musical Mann Act by

transporting my songs across state lines. [laughs] Should have learned from Chuck

Berry! But yeah, that's fair enough! I draw upon that element of myself, but anybody that knows me knows I'm not, ah, sitting in a bar with a whisky in one hand and a gun in the other. That's not how I spend most of my day. I love that style of writing, though. It's a Raymond Carver kind of things. Writers who give you just the minimal, key outline of what's going on and leave you to fill in the rest, who set you up for what's about to happen then say, "Okay, now you figure out the rest." That's really exciting — and terrifying too.

Pelecanos has described your music in terms of its novelistic, literary tone.

He has said that the songs I write are a lot like writing fiction — not that I'm saying my records are novels by any means. I wouldn't claim that. But there is a bit of storytelling in there. And George's books, man, you can hear the music. He gives you the soundtrack in the way the characters talk and everything, and it really is so musical. In fact, we attempted to write a few songs together by email, and I think it still may happen. He's a great lyric writer and sent me some incredible lyrics. I was inspired by that last Warren Zevon record where he wrote the songs with Hunter S. Thompson and the others

In "Amphetamine," which is your full-on rocker, kind of Dream Syndicate-meets-"Sympathy For The Devil," you have a bit of that noir thing happening too. The guy in the song has this "seventh son of the seventh son, etcetera" mojo going on.

Yeah, there was a fan in Europe who came up to me and said he wanted to

have some of that song's lyrics for his tombstone: [recites] "If I fear for the devil and I fear for myself, Lord, I'm gonna have to fear for everybody else."

It reminds me maybe of one of Pelecanos' characters, who's finally getting out and is defiant and celebrating but little does he know, disaster may lurk just around the corner...

That happens all the time in his books. A lot of characters with false hopes and delusions. And a lot of stuff happens in cars. A lot of mine, too. I've written a lot of songs where someone's in a car and they're either going straight to hell or making a breakthrough. That comes from living in L.A. where you live your whole life in a car. I think it's no accident that a lot of freaks and serial killers, and on the other hand a lot of really good writers, come out of L.A. You spend a lot of time alone behind the wheel of the car and a lot of time to think about things that you want to change, or you're not happy about. I mean, that much isolation while sitting in a few tons of steel and moving at 70 miles an hour, you know, you're gonna build up a lot! [laughs]

Does environment affect your songwriting? I'm thinking about the Tucson bands and the cliché "desert rock" too.

Is it because of the environment, the heat and all that, or because all those people got together around the same time and influenced each other? Does the Laurel Canyon stuff in the '70s sound like it does because of the landscape of Laurel Canyon or because the folks worshiped Neil Young and Joni Mitchell and wanted to be just like them? It's hard to say. I write most when I'm home. LA influenced me in one way, like I said. But NYC even more I think, just because there's so much going on around you all the time. All you have to do is walk out your door and walk five blocks down Broadway, and if you write down everything you hear you'll have enough songs for the next two albums! Listen to this one guy in the donut shop, write down what he says, put a D chord behind it – and you've got a rock opera!

And I think I've written a lot more, and my writing's gotten better, since I've been in New York. I get really inspired by just going outside and walking around. And that's a kind of

solitude too. Walking around New York and looking at things and hearing things and seeing things and taking it all in. That's been really inspiring for me. Holing up in the apartment and staring at the wall and waiting for a lyric to come or find the right place to put the A-minor chord, that can get you boxed into a corner. But I just walk outside, grab a cup of coffee, and I get a hundred ideas. I've always loved it here and always wanted to live here before. Very inspiring.

Here's a kind of fantasy question: What song do you wish you'd written?

Of course there isn't just one! One of my favourite songs ever is "The Mercy Seat" by Nick Cave. It's incredible, the music, the lyrics, everything about. Late '80s. And then hearing Johnny Cash do it more recently kind of proved that to be true, because to hear someone like him sing it is a good way to tell if it's a great song or not. I'd play it if I could sing the song right. And I really like a lot of Jimmy Webb stuff, like "Wichita Lineman." Usually I'm not a big fan of really vague, surreal, impossible-to-interpret lyrics; I kind of like lyrics that stick it to you. And his lyrics really make almost no sense, but I kinda like the way he makes no sense!

Also just about any Holland-Dozier-Holland songs. And every song on *Dusty In Memphis* and every song on *Sail Away!*

The Nick Cave song: would that have been on your list had you not heard the Johnny Cash version?

Oh yeah. I've always loved that song, from the first time I heard it completely blew my mind. And I heard a version that the Bad Seeds did, a kind of acoustic, radio version that came out somewhere. That really brought it out and made me take extra notice of it as well. You can strip something down like that, and if it sounds equally as great as it does with all the amps turned up, you know you've got a great song. And there are a lot of songs that wouldn't work on an acoustic guitar but sound great because they're exciting – but those are more great performances and great productions. A great song *has* to work on an acoustic guitar.

What's the key to writing a great song?

Does it move you? Inspire you? Make you angry or sad? Make you want to fall in love? Make you want to cry or get in a fight? Any of those things – those are the keys to great songs. If it makes you want to watch TV or check your email, it's not a great song. [laughs] More than anything, it's about when a song leaves you in a different place than you were when the song started.

There's probably no greater compliment than for someone to come up to you at a show and cite a specific song and how it made them feel.

Yeah, I love that: "That song broke my heart... It helped me meet my wife..."

Is there any period or era you think was especially fruitful in terms of songwriting?

The Brill Building era, definitely, say 1962-65, for the discipline and craft and expediency. And one of my biggest musical fantasies has always been to have been around during the Brill era. I mean, I walk past it two or three times a week. I just stare at it. I wish I could have been there writing with Carole King or Cynthia Weill. Folks will say to me that they think I'm prolific with a record each year or a couple a year. And I laugh! Just because I wrote 20 songs last year I'm prolific? That's nothing – that was a *week* at the Brill Building!

The other side would be early '70s and the Laurel Canyon-type writers, for sheer fearlessness – and self-indulgence! [laughs] Joni Mitchell and Neil Young were completely self-indulgent and self-obsessed, breaking all the rules and just laying their life on the line. I always loved those types of songs. Maybe not Jackson Browne, but definitely Neil and Joni. Just seemed naked, the way they laid their souls out. And they were great, too. It's one thing to be self-indulgent, self-obsessed and confessional – and be lousy. But if you're that good, well... And who had ever done that? There had never been lyricists before the '70s, before that period, who were that much into telling you what they felt about things and how ecstatic or bummed out they were in such a self-indulgent way.

Even though you've got the band, you still do solo shows too - is that the latent folkie coming out in you? Last year you also did the Songwriters' Circle tour in the

UK with Walter Salas-Humara [Silos], Robert Fisher [Willard Grant Conspiracy] and Deanna Varagona [Lambchop].

I am doing about five or six overseas solo shows soon. I got asked to do this two-day folk festival in Norway – which is funny, because I don't think of myself as a folkie! – and also this Guildford date in the UK, so I filled in some dates around those two.

The Songwriters' Circle thing was fun, and it was a challenge, because usually I'm out there doing my songs for a whole evening, so it was cool to be out there with other songwriters and just trading back and forth for an evening. And it's funny, too, because I said I don't write on the road, but I did write songs on that tour, so maybe that was part of it too, just sitting around and seeing how other people work inspiring me. They are all really good writers, and I'm going, "Ah! They're making different choices than I would. They write this song in this way..." It makes you think about your own stuff.

Last question. I saw mentioned on your website that you programmed a Delta Airlines In-Flight Broadcast last year, picking an hour's worth of tunes from folks like Tom Waits, Dylan, Springsteen, Lucinda Williams, etc. Is this some sort of side deejay career you're testing the waters for "testing the air," actually?

Oh yeah! [laughs] And I'm supposed to do another one for Delta next month so I have to think of some ideas.

Between that, the band, the solo acoustic gigging, and the tombstone inscription, you're becoming quite the Renaissance man, Steve.

Airline Deejay – Tombstone Writer... I like the sound of both of those. They're good jobs.

Written and arranged by Fred Mills for Ptolemaic Terrascope, August 2003