

# Review of *The Mountain*

by Steve Earle and the Del McCoury Band  
(music CD, Grapevine Records, 1999)

Any diagnosis of the popular music scene based on the evidence of MTV videos, the Eurovision song contest or the Top Twenty charts could only conclude that this aspect of human culture is in a pretty parlous state. Cultural degradation seems to be marching in time with environmental despoliation. Modern music tends to alternate between utterly pasteurised Muzak, the musical equivalent of McDonalds, on the one hand, and, on the other, equally empty but even more tuneless disco beat, as painful on the ear as it is on the mind.

Yet there are exceptions and one is the latest CD from the American musician Steve Earle, a veteran of the country and folk rock scene. It sees him teaming up with the premier bluegrass band built around the three McCoury brothers on guitar, banjo and mandolin, with fiddler Jason Carter and double bass player Mike Bub, plus assorted guests.

Earle's life has had its ups and downs, with more than its share of drugs, divorce and general disorder, including a spell in jail. Yet, somehow, he has survived and is producing work light years away from the bland commercial pap of so-called New Country artists like Garth Brooks. This CD is dedicated to the memory of the great bluegrass artist Bill Monroe and surely he would have been pleased with the results. (An exception might be the CD sleeve which is illegible in parts due to poor layout and typesetting)

There are several reasons why ecologically minded listeners should lend an ear to *The Mountain* and to Earle's work in general. Some readers, for example, might have seen the group performing on BBC 2's *Jools Holland Show*. Part of the degeneracy of contemporary music-making is its sheer artifice, not least its dependence on technology such as mixing desks and backing tapes as a substitute for actual talent. By contrast, on that show Earle and his partners gave a classic exposition of what musicianship is all about, grouped around a single microphone, giving individual instruments prominence simply by leaning forward. Refreshingly, music-making, not ego-boosting, came first.

But it is also the content of the music which is so refreshing, not just the way it is performed. All the songs on the CD are written by Earle and the lyrics are deeply rooted in both place and history, mainly in this case the eastern mountains of the USA. Insofar as most pop songs contain any audible words, they reflect the self-indulgent, materialistic nature of consumerist society. Earle's writing stands in marked contrast. It is as sharp as his voice, with a political edge far more cutting and focused than, dare I say it, the likes of Bob Dylan, whose political songs tended to stick to more fashionable causes. Sometimes country and hillbilly music is stereotyped as redneck music. Earle's work strongly refutes that label.

Listen to, for example, 'Harlan Man', a song about a Kentucky miner: "I took a union stand, no what the company said". (Earle took a stand against Ronald Reagan's assault on workers' rights and, more recently, opposed capital punishment as well as supported Farm Aid). Earle's songs are infused with a love of the land. In 'The Mountain', the lyrics open grandly but starkly, to a gorgeous melody: "I was born on this mountain a long time ago, before they knocked the timber and strip-mined the coal". Other songs delve further into history such as 'Dixieland', the story of an Irish rebel fighting for the Union army.

Earle stands in the footsteps of such luminaries as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Earle follows Guthrie in tackling the Depression and the Dust Bowl disaster. His work similarly portrays an America scarred by injustice and heartlessness. But I suspect there may be a deeper ecological sensibility in Earle's work, though, of course, there is the usual American litany of girls, cars, highways and roadside bars as well. Though Guthrie's music in particular possessed an elemental rawness, Earle's music too has a sharp edge and driving energy, not least due to his familiarity with rock idioms. Some of Bruce Springsteen's songs, especially from his post-'stadium rock' period also touch upon the experiences of ordinary Americans ('Tom Joad' etc.). However, having seen him perform this material in concert, I have to say that Earle's current music direction delivers more downright pleasure in sheer listening terms.

There have been rock groups that have consciously delved into the past. The most notable example to date has been mainly Canadian group, **The Band**. Its lead guitarist Robbie Robertson in particular continued that work after the group split in the early 70s, most recently exploring the native American dimension. But their best work was nonetheless marred perhaps by an excessively elliptical style while the strength of Earle's lyrics partly stems from its very straightforwardness.

The only note of caution to sound here concerns the pressure to play loud, itself both a reflection and source of excessive levels of noise pollution in modern society. The McCoury sound is a comparatively gentle, subtle one and, sadly the ears of many record buyers have been so befouled by heavy metal, rap, drum 'n bass, and blaring disco that such fine sounds may not get their listeners they serve. In turn, this may put an irresistible pressure on Earle himself to overcrank the wattage on his next outing. Sadly, the distinction between greater musical power and more decibels of sound is one widely ignored.

Perhaps Earle somewhat indulges himself in the 'outlaw' persona on some of his CDs. After all, one person's 'rebel rouser' is another's anti-social pest. There is a thin line between individual liberty, which he clearly cherishes, and a destructive licence, something exploited by bodies such as the gun lobby. That his music provokes such thoughts is a testament to its strength, a stark contrast to the barrenness of most music today.

Earle may not have been a model citizen but he certainly has served his time on the music scene and it is far richer for his efforts. The excellent CD, *Car Wheel on a Gravel Road*, from **Lucinda Williams**, a bluesier folk artist, was, for example, part produced by Earle. Globalisation and the commercial imperative together might be ironing out the once rich diversity of musical cultures around the world. But as long as Steve Earle and others ploughing a similar furrow (Ry Cooder first springs to mind) survive, there will still be riches to be found midst all the dross.

**Sandy Irvine**