

The blues according to Sicknote Steve

By T A Lisman

To audiences in the West Country and South Wales, the familiar bearded figure of the hobo bluesman Sicknote Steve has become synonymous with a great session of the blues. Now appearing further afield with gigs proposed around the country and bringing with him the music of the Grammy Award winning Seasick Steve, blues fans are asking just who is Sicknote Steve?

"I started out playing drums in a local rock band in 1968. The bass player was a blues nut and soon turned on to legends such as Son House, Skip James, Fred McDowell, Bukka White and of course Mr. Johnson." Inspired by Dylan's version of House of the Rising Sun from his first album, Steve taught himself basic folk guitar and started hanging out at folk/blues sessions around Cardiff and the Rhondda.

"In 1972 I headed for London and played some jams at the Marquee, and did some busking." But not all went smoothly and like so many young people attracted to the city, Steve learned the hard way. "I got robbed and ended up with the tramps on the Embankment and on park benches." But even through the lean times, his musical education continued. "I found a job road sweeping the streets around Victoria Station and qualified for a bed in the Church Army hostel, which was home to more than fifty beat guys and musicians chasing the dream in the single dormitory, so nobody had much sleep!"

But Steve's drumming skills proved a lifeline. "I met a band in the Elephant and Castle who needed a stick-man for a tour of UK universities. We hit the road for two months living in an old American yellow schoolbus." But on his return to London, he discovered he had lost his bed in

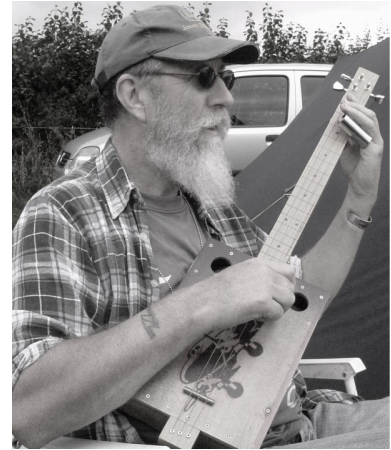
the hostel and was back on the streets. "I was at a really low point so retreated back to stay with granny in Cardiff." This was when he met famed rock and roll pianist Dave Williams and started playing gigs at weekly spot in the legendary New Moon Club in the City's Hayes.

His musical credentials firmly established, Steve was about to enter a transformational period of his career. "I met Steve Gibbons on a visit to the Isle of Man in 1979 and for five years was his roadie, drummer and sometime bassman." But he was always reminded that any success was just a short distance from his London hostel days. "Even though we toured all over Europe, visiting the greatest cities and often staying in the finest hotels, when I came home, I slept in my old van tucked away in Cardiff's Roath Park."

The attractions of one of Europe's liveliest cities held Steve's fascination for a while, but after a stint living and playing in Munich he came home and played with some of the most highly regarded bands on the circuit; The Bourbon Boys, Le Rue and The Howling Sleepers. "Playing with some of the finest musicians and greatest personalities was a fantastic experience but nothing will ever replace the memories of Sundays down the Royal Oak with Tich Gwilym and Phil."

From 1987 Steve started playing the pub/club circuits establishing his name as a solo and duo performer and over the years developed his all-round experience playing guitar, banjo, mandolin, harmonica, whistle and more. "I did ok on the pub/club circuit around South Wales where you have to entertain all kinds of audiences. And so I built up an enormous song-list, but the best gigs were always when I could let rip with the blues."

In 2008 Steve was to experience another life-changing moment. "A nasty motorcycle accident got me pondering about the possible effect of losing the use of my left hand and unable to play the frets. An idea formed to try and learn to play slide guitar. Using Seasick Steve as my guide I spent four months of recovery time learning his songs."



Able to sing and play again, Steve played some open mic nights in Cardiff. "To my surprise people, especially youngsters, loved my interpretations of the great Seasick." Adding more of Seasick Steve's songs to his repertoire alongside some of the great blues classics, so many people commented on the similarity of their physical appearance, he became known as Sicknote Steve.

When Seasick Steve played Cardiff in November 2009, the local Steve worked backstage and had the opportunity to meet his hero. "He was a generous, down to earth, genuine bloke. He signed the back of my three-string guitar. We shared my bottle of Jack Daniels but I seem to remember that he drank most of it!"

Since then promoters festival organisers and venues have been booking 'Sicknote Steve' and sometimes billing him as a Seasick tribute act. "It was never my intention to be a 'tribute act'. What I try to do is a celebration of the work of a blues genius. A man you don't get the chance to see too often. Sometimes when you copy genius a little bit rubs off, and hopefully some might stick!"

For information about Sicknote Steve go to talismansounds.com/sicknotesteve