



Steve Earle

Why clean socks are an essential on your rider and our best Spinal Tap moment yet!

Words
David Mead



What was your first gig?

"It depends on what you call my first gig... If we're talking about 'the road,' it would be probably a place in Athens, Georgia and they fired us. We were supposed to play three nights and they fired us because they were used to show bands – y'know, really slick hard-rock bands. Then they didn't pay us, and when I tried to get the money I got a pistol in my face. And so it didn't go all that well! I'd played gigs before that, sort of hitchhiked around Texas, but getting out with a band and trying to tour that would be the first, and it was a bummer."

What's on your rider?

"Not very much. A lot of fizzy water, coffee for the bus... and socks. Socks for the crew and for me; it's just one of those things – the less socks there are on the bus, the better."

Describe your current stage rig...

"It's pretty straightforward. One line going to a switcher that switches between the acoustic and the electric side; the acoustic side goes through two Fishman Auras, one for my acoustic guitar and one for my mandolin family instruments. Switch to the other side and it goes through my electric rig, which goes through a pedalboard in which I've got a Fulltone overdrive and two delays

– I can't remember what they are right now. One's set on a slap, one's set on a longer delay – I mean, a really long delay, a kinda weird, psychedelic sort of delay – and then there's a tuner.

"I use one Peavey Classic 50 amplifier and a 4x10 cabinet and the one you're seeing on stage is not the one I'm actually playing through; that is the spare, facing forwards. My amp is facing backwards because it keeps it off the vocal mic that way.

"I use a James Trussart Steelcaster with a humbucker in the front position and a Bigsby. Acoustics are two Martin M-size guitars; in North America I carry a M-21 Steve Earle, but when I have to fly I've got an M-36 with an M-38 as a backup."

What's your best tip for getting a good live sound?

"A great house mixer for one thing! And I've got one. If you're dealing with electric instruments, guitar players have to learn that their instrument doesn't sound, out in the audience, anything like it does when they're standing in front of the amp – and I suggest you either baffle your amps or turn them around backwards. I think ear monitors are great for live sound. It's not just about what you hear. Take monitors out of the equation; you're freeing your house mixer up to make

you sound like a record out front, because he doesn't have to deal with feedback or instruments bleeding into one another."

What non-musical item couldn't you do without on tour?

"Probably the satellite dish on the bus during baseball season. I'm a big baseball fan: I follow two sports, baseball and English Premier League football, and we get more matches in the States than you guys do on TV here now and so it's pretty easy to follow."

What's your best tip for getting the audience on your side?

"Just staying connected with them. You have to act like you care that they're there – you have to remember who the boss is, and it's them, it's not you. I'll do anything to get an audience on my side, just about, beyond compromising my politics. The way to deal with a heckler is to turn the audience against them, which is pretty easy to do and I've got pretty good at that. I learned that from Doc Watson; he was always really good at dealing with drunks."

What's the best venue you've played in and why?

"Probably Massey Hall in Toronto, all things considered. I've got a lot of favourite ones. I

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OPPOSITE "You have to remember who the boss is and it's the audience, not you"

miss playing Shepherd's Bush Empire a lot, but my fans got to the point here where they were old enough that we needed to play the Royal Festival Hall – we needed seats!"

What's the worst journey that you've had either to or from a gig?

"Riding back from Dallas after playing Lollapalooza the year that Metallica were on it and getting things thrown at us through the whole set by Texas Metallica fans. I'd never had that happen before and I was just pretty bummed. We were going straight back to Nashville after the show and it was just a long, depressing ride."

What's your favourite live album?

"The Allman Brothers' *At Fillmore East*. It was the record that finally broke them because you didn't really get The Allman Brothers if you didn't see them live, and I did get to see them once when Duane was still alive... A real close second would be an album called *Deliverin'* by Poco, which was the same thing; all the songs by them that we know and love come from that live album."

What's the nearest you've come to a Spinal Tap moment on tour?

"There was a sort of intentional Spinal Tap moment. We were playing Rock City in Nottingham on the last night of a UK tour and I did this long mandolin solo to open this piece called *Dominick Street*. I was way out on the apron and my guys made a teeny tiny 12-inch-tall Stonehenge, lowered it from the rafters and our little Irish merch guy came out and danced around it. Everybody was laughing and I didn't know why. I didn't think it was all that funny at the time..." **[DM]**



Steve Earle's latest album, *So You Wannabe An Outlaw*, is available now via Warner Bros www.steveearle.com