

No End in Sight

The Mike Estep Band celebrates 15 years by still going strong

By Jessica Novak

Mike Estep never saw a 15-year run coming when the Mike Estep Band started in 1998. Now, he can't imagine it ending.

The guitarist, singer and songwriter is soft-spoken and humble, something that bassist Paul Opel makes up for on stage by being the main speaker between songs. But at the core of a group that has seen only a few lineup changes over the years (and only on the best terms), Estep has said enough through his songs to keep a band together that still never tires of playing its collective brand of blue-collar rock.

The group started somewhat accidentally in 1998 when Estep was going in to record a solo album at Todd Hobin Studios. He had been playing on his own for years and had enough material saved up for a record but never gave thought to starting a band. However, throughout the recording process, about 10 musicians contributed their talents to the album. When the time came for a CD release party, it was only natural to play as a full band.

"I thought to do it {the release party and show} solo," Estep says innocently. "But I was approached by the people who played on the record to do it as a band. We had never been in the same room together to practice, but it was such a great time that everyone said we should do it again. We booked more gigs at Hemmingway's {now Mohegan Manor, in Baldwinsville} that night."

That first lineup included Estep, Jeff Favalo on guitar, Tommy Scott on guitar, Brett Hobin on bass, Dani Ryan on vocals and Estep's son, Mike, on drums. Quickly, the group took a more lasting shape with Steve Orlando Jr. on drums and a year later, Opel on bass. The lineup continued that way until Ryan had to leave the group because of scheduling conflicts, and after two years of commuting from Rochester, Favalo left in 2007. After a few guitarists filled in, well-known local talent Tim Herron offered his services to the group and joined in 2009.

"I can't say enough about having Tim in the band," Estep says. "Not only is he an amazing musician, but his personality fits perfectly."

The group plays regular rotations at Coleman's, Shifty's and Dinosaur Bar-B-Que and has been featured at many local festivals and summer events, including Balloonfest and the New York State Fair. They've also played outside of the area,

including an unusual opportunity on Memorial Day in Washington, D.C., in 2002.

Estep had been invited to play Memorial Day in 1998 after a friend visiting the Vietnam Memorial gave a cassette tape to an employee, who passed it along. The cassette had a song, "Walking Along the Wall," that Estep had written about the Vietnam Memorial. Once the right ears heard it, Estep was answering a phone call from the communications director of the site.

"I thought maybe they were calling to ask permission to play the song," he says. "But they called and asked me to come down and play it. Graham Nash had played it the year before!"

The band went back down to perform the song four years later, which speaks to the songwriting of Estep, who names the "usual suspects" influences of Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan and Richard Thompson. It comes through in his rockin' soul tunes which have also been captured on four albums; Estep sees another in the future.

But the beauty of the band, and the secret to its longevity, is in the mellow personalities. "There are no egos in this group," Opel says. "We're just happy to be part of it."

And Estep is happy to have them. "If I had a chance to change the name, it's the first thing I'd do," he says. "We all contribute. Everyone plays a vital part. We are four pieces to a puzzle."

In addition to contributing instrumentals to the group, each player also sings, a unique and popular quality.

"We all sing and all take leads and harmonies," Opel says.

"The style doesn't change, but the voices do," Estep adds.

For those who want to hear the group, the reunion show will be a prime opportunity. Favalo, who hasn't performed with

the band since leaving, will return, and some older tunes that haven't seen a stage in years will be brought back to life.

"We always try to have a good time," Opel says. "We're always joking, trying to help everyone have a good time."

"And we're not quitting anytime soon," Estep chimes in.

That's good news for Central New York. □

MUSIC



Social Commentator

Songwriting legend and activist Steve Earle uses varied creative outlets

The New Times Interview

By Josh Breeden

Singer-songwriter Steve Earle is the ultimate musical hybrid: a hard-scrabble country picker with an activist's heart, a poet's pen and a rocker's moxie. He grew up in San Antonio, Texas, the son of an air traffic controller. At 16, Earle dropped out of high school; as a teen, he traveled the state with his idol, iconic singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt. Earle moved to Nashville when he was 19.

In 1986, after years of club gigs and a few staff songwriting jobs at publishers in Nashville, the singer released his debut solo LP, *Guitar Town* (MCA Records). Earle's neo-traditionalist country style and rock leanings—Springsteen fans dug him—made the record a hit. Critics and fans also lauded the follow-up, *Exit O* (MCA).

His next two albums, 1988's *Copperhead Road* and 1990's *The Hard Way* (both MCA), although critically acclaimed, were commercial failures. Earle had veered too far into rock territory, a move traditional Nashville simply refused to accept. When MCA terminated Earle's contract in 1991, Earle soon fell into a drug-fueled depression and stopped recording.

After four years of inactivity, the newly sober singer-songwriter returned with *Train a Comin'* (Winter Harvest) in 1995. The record was nominated for a Grammy for best contemporary folk album.

Earle reached his peak during the mid-1990s, recording two more acclaimed albums and earning a contract with Warner Brothers.

Earle, 58, has established himself a songwriting legend. Since his 1990s comeback, he's released consistently well-received work, including 2009's *Townes* (New West), an album of Townes Van Zandt covers for which he won a Grammy for best folk recording. Earle released *The Low Highway* (New West) on April 16.

He's also continued a career-long pattern of political activity, making controversial comments on the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq, while spearheading anti-death penalty efforts.

Earle lives in Greenwich Village with his wife, country singer Allison Moorer, and 3-year-old son, John Henry.

Having been an activist and a socially conscious artist for much of your career, where do you find yourself politically these days?

Well, I'm much happier with Obama in office than I was with Bush. Things are still in pretty bad shape in Washington, though. There are a lot of things that I don't agree with Obama on: drones, his feelings on guns. Obama's foreign policy strategy isn't that much different from Bush's. But we do have the framework for a health care system, which a lot of people tried to do. Now that he's got a second term, he has a chance to really build on it. I voted for him the second time specifically for that.

I'm not a Democrat. I'm something more to the left of that. I'm pretty pragmatic; I'm pretty realistic about what this democracy is and what it isn't.

You've been a pretty outspoken death-penalty opponent. Why is that?

Well, I grew up in Texas. Granted, I'd moved away by the time Texas really started executing a lot of people, but my mother still lived there. It just never seemed like the right thing to do to me. I literally grew up in an America with virtually no death penalty. It just didn't happen very much, and they finally did away with it in the '70s. Then, suddenly, they brought it back a few years later, and I couldn't help but notice that it was going on. You know, if you're gonna be an activist, there's a lot of issues out there, and that one just sort of found me I guess.

The Low Highway contains the usual amount of social commentary we've come to expect from you. One track in particular, "Invisible," addresses homelessness. How did that song come about?

The very first activist organization I was involved with in the '80s was a group called Fearless Hearts for Homeless Children. I helped co-found it. Homelessness has always been an issue, but it's probably more of an issue now than it's ever been. Times are hard. There are homeless people in my neighborhood {Greenwich

IF YOU GO

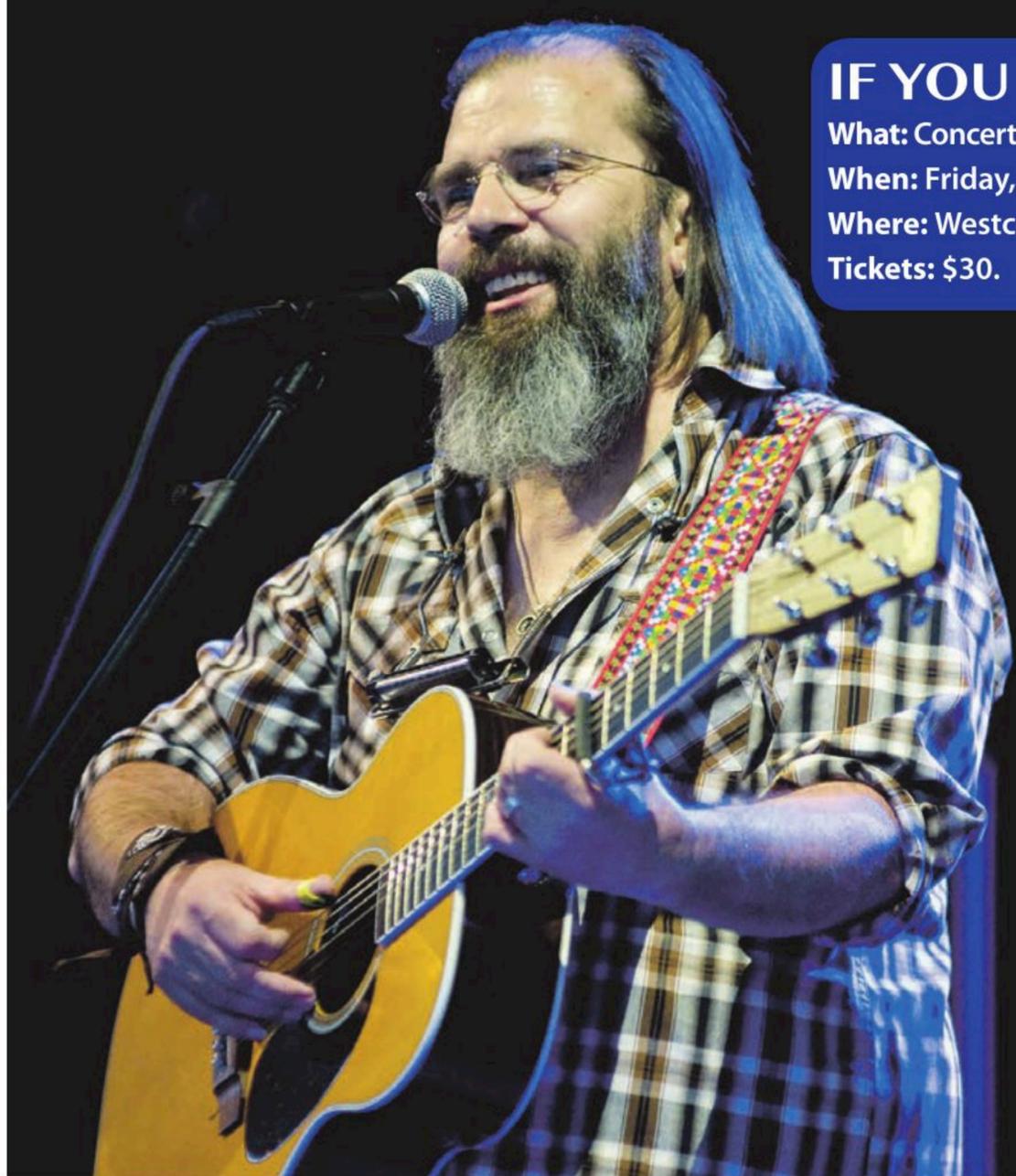
What: Mike Estep Band's 15-year anniversary show

When: Saturday, May 11, 9 p.m.

Where: Shifty's, 1401 Burnet Ave.

Cost: Free

Information: 474-0048



WARREN LINHART PHOTO

IF YOU GO

What: Concert by Steve Earle and his band, The Dukers.

When: Friday, May 10. The doors open at 7 p.m.

Where: Westcott Theater, 524 Westcott St.

Tickets: \$30.

offer, but I have a little boy {Joe Henry} who was diagnosed with autism a year ago, and taking care of him is really expensive. So I went back and asked how much my memoir would be worth. {The publisher} said it was worth a lot more, so I made a deal.

How has the experience been so far?

It's been OK. There are days when I can't even stand to look at it. It's too much me. But I work on it, anyway,

because it's my job. I need the money, so I'm going to finish it.

You've also taken on some acting gigs recently: *Tremé*, *30 Rock*, a role in Tim Blake Nelson's 2009 film *Leaves of Grass*. What do you get out of acting?

The acting I've done has mainly been scripted by really good writers, like Tim Blake Nelson. That's a lot of it. It's good exercise for a writer because you figure out how good writers write, so that's the main reason.

I learn a lot from {those writers} that I bring back to my own craft. Plus, I need to earn a living, and the music business isn't what it used to be. I don't sell millions of records, I never have. But I have an audience and different creative outlets keep you connected to your audience. □

Village}, and it's one of the richest areas in New York City. I mean, I'm just a renter here, and I can barely afford it. But we forget about people, and that's what "Invisible" is about: We choose to see who we see and who we don't.

You moved from Nashville to Greenwich Village in 2005. How has the change in scenery affected you creatively?

New York is just New York. I was in Nashville a long time and I probably needed it. I needed a place where I could see any movie, read any book, see live theater. I just need the artistic input. You got to have input in order to have output.

Next month will see the release of the box set *Steve Earle: The Warner Bros. Years*, containing three of your records from the mid-1990s—*Train a Comin'*, *I Feel Alright* and *El Corazón*—and a few live rarities. Did you have a hand in that?

Well, I didn't decide to do it, they did. They approached me about it, and I agreed. It's got a DVD of an MTV special I did in 1995 and a show I did at {Cold Creek Correctional Facility} in Tennessee. There's also a live recording of the show at Pulp Theater, in Nashville, on Dec. 1,

1995. That was my first performance after I started making records again, when *Train* came out. It's a pretty cool disc.

I've read before that you consider those albums during the mid-1990s, the ones you recorded after your four-year hiatus, to be career-defining. Why are those records so important?

The records I made in the '80s were a kind of a struggle, but I'm really proud of them. I had some time to think about it. {Producer} Ray Kennedy and I found a way of recording that really worked for me, and I paid more attention to the actual making of the records rather than just writing the songs. And that's where my records in the '90s came from. I hadn't made a record in four years. It was a sequence of productivity. I was playing catch-up.

Over the past few years, you've published a short-story collection titled *Doghouse Roses*, and a novel, *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive*. In August, you decided to publish a memoir, something you said you'd never do. Why the change of heart?

I mainly did it because it was worth a lot of money. I had an offer for a novel on the table, and it was a pretty good

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