

with RALPH STEADMAN

I tap on the sliding glass door to Ralph Steadman's studio, a large outbuilding adjacent to his fine Georgian house outside Maidstone, Kent. Inside is a scene of creative chaos — rickety easels, standing lights, broken electronic equipment, half-finished pictures, art materials galore. There are other rooms here, all jammed with similar artistic clutter. I walk in lightly, fearful that one clumsy step or errant elbow will cause a catastrophic domino collapse of the great cartoonist's precious bric-a-brac.

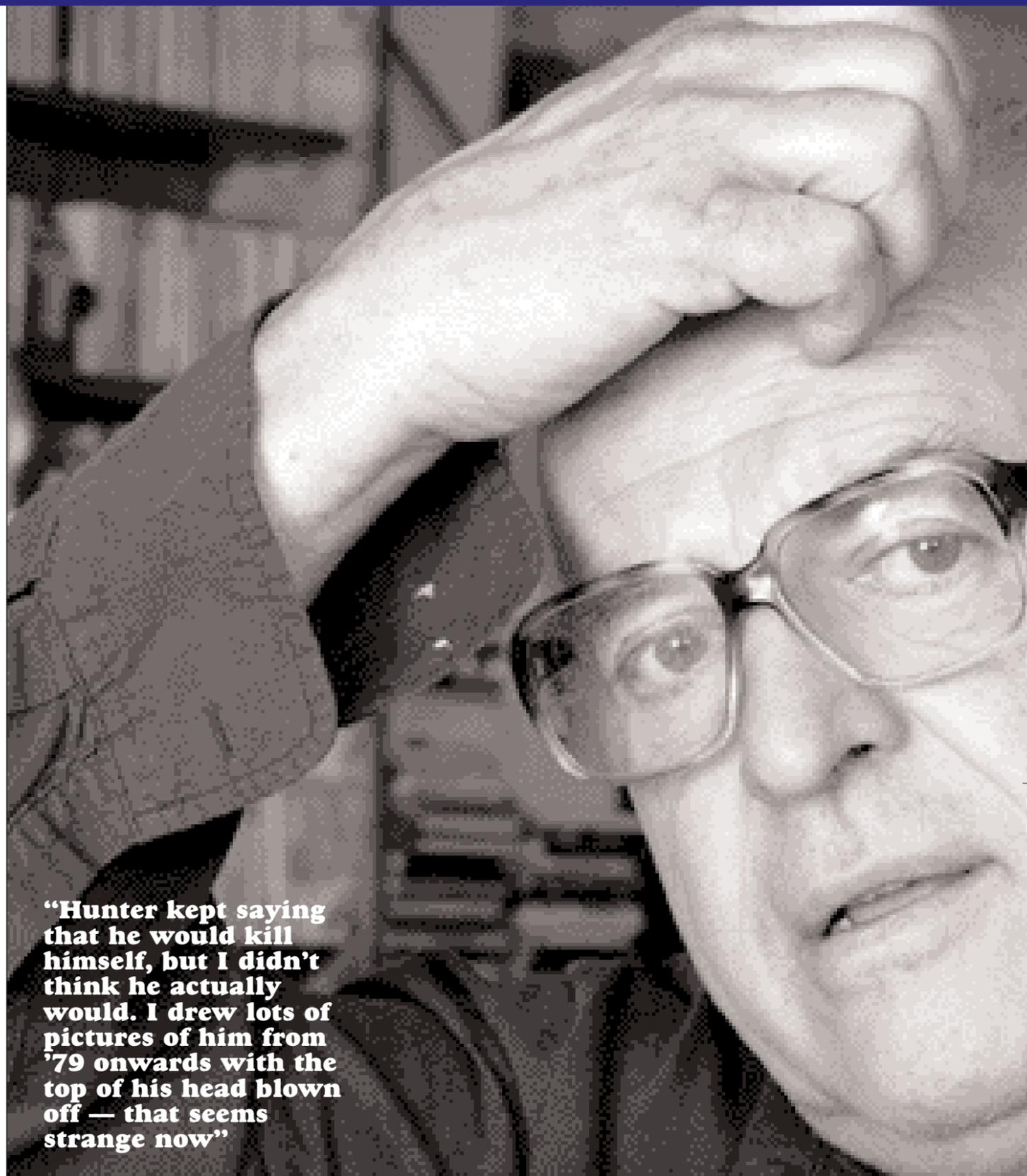
Steadman, in heavy square spectacles, welcomes me warmly, but casually, like a pal he's seen moments before. At his worktop, pen in hand, he's struggling over that week's drawing for Will Self's Psychogeography column in *The Independent*. But, as I soon find out, it's not just this single cartoon that is troubling him.

Recently, Steadman, now 70, has completed a memoir about his 35-year friendship and intoxicating collaboration with Hunter S. Thompson, which brought the world *Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas*, gonzo journalism, and much more. Steadman began the book as he recoiled from the shock of Thompson's single head-shot suicide in Aspen on 20 February 2005, at the age of 67.

Churning over the emotional silt of what was a complex and, ultimately, iconic union has affected Steadman profoundly. A kind and sensitive man, he has discovered that so much of Thompson's impact on his life and career was as painful as it was fulfilling. This is Steadman's first interview to promote the book and maybe he is not quite ready. Hence, our talk is at times awkward and a little baffling as he mournfully trails off on fragmented anecdotes.

On a shelf above the worktop and on a wall opposite are two matching black and white photos of Steadman's artistic hero and inspiration, Picasso. He stares out at us with one oil-pool eye.

Ralph, your book is called *The Joke's Over*. What is behind the title? Is that how you feel these days? Well, he used to say [Steadman slips into a well-practiced, gruff, quick-fire American accent whenever he quotes Thompson]: "The joke's over, Ralph, there's no fun anymore." So, in a way, I think, yes, the fun is over. The death of fun, it feels like to me.



"Hunter kept saying that he would kill himself, but I didn't think he actually would. I drew lots of pictures of him from '79 onwards with the top of his head blown off — that seems strange now"

Writing the book must have been quite an experience. Has it been a cathartic exercise, in a positive way?

Yes, I suppose it was cathartic. It was an emotional... you know, when he did what he did, it threw me into a terrible depression. My first words to Joe [Petro, American artist and close friend of Thompson] who rang me in the middle of the night was... he said: "Take your phone off the hook, Hunter has just shot himself." I thought he wasn't serious and I said: "About bloody time, too. He's been threatening to do that for years!" Hunter did say to me: "I feel real trapped in this life, I could commit suicide at any moment."

Do you mind me asking, Ralph, how bad was your depression and how did it manifest itself?

I went to the doctor's about it. I was more or less crying all the time. I couldn't stop. There was a strange sense of... somehow there was a huge hole left. Very strange, really.

That's the odd thing, you see, we weren't like buddies who would want to see each other all the time. Sometimes we hadn't seen each other for three years... but it was always good to see him again. It has really only sunk home just how big a figure he was to a lot of journalists. He took journalism

to where it hadn't been before — that was the extraordinary thing about him.

When was the last time you saw Hunter and what are your lasting memories of that time?

He did it in February and we [Steadman and his wife, Anna] had seen him in the October. Joe was with us and we got some things signed. Joe said: "I have got a horrible feeling that's the last time we will see him alive." I didn't have the same sense. I thought: Oh, he'll be OK, but he had got to the point where things had started to break down — that's the drug abuse.

[Returning to the day of Thompson's death] I did take my phone off the hook, but I put it back on the next day and it went right away. It was *The Independent*. I did a piece for them, and that was good for me. I didn't feel anything just then — I was writing objectively and, in a way, it felt good. But I could imagine Hunter saying: "Don't do this, Ralph." He used to say to me: "Don't write, Ralph, you'll bring shame on your family." [That is the lead epigraph to the book.] He was cruel like that. I... erm... it's quite hard for me to talk about all this now. I'm not much good to you today — I am not giving you much of a performance. It's all in the book. [We move on to discuss Ralph's news schedule.]

Portrait
Becky Nixon



by Rob McGibbon

RALPH'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers

I only get *The Independent*, which I like because it is so objective and there's no bullshit. All that crap *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* get up to, the *Indy* doesn't get involved. I pick it up locally, but I am not interested in a newspaper every day. I like Howard Jacobson and, of course, Will Self, but my favourite is Robert Fisk. He is a fantastic journalist. I like the objectivity and persistence of the man. He is so committed, I can't believe it. I usually get the *Indy* on Sunday as well.

Magazines

I like the *New Statesman* and I used to read *Private Eye*, but I wouldn't bother with it now. It is so pedestrian and I don't like the Englishness of it.

I get Sotheby's catalogue and I like looking at unseen Picassos. They crop up every now and then and it's incredible to see them. Generally, I can't be bothered. I'll tell you what's happened — I have forgotten what I like. I used to be much more involved, but in a way I have got uninterested. I think the media have overwhelmed everything.



Radio

I listen to *Today* from 6am everyday, which is why I don't always need a newspaper. We leave the radio on all night on the World Service — never music. Don't know why, but I sleep better. Extraordinary bloody thing really. I have always done it. Sometimes Anna switches it off, then I wake up and put it back on, or I use a single mic (sic) under my pillow. I used to bloody hate that UK theme. Fucking awful thing and I wish they wouldn't do that bloody *Shipping Forecast*. Why do we ordinary people need that? A slight wind up the Mull of Kintyre — what the fuck is that?

Television

I only watch the BBC *Ten O'Clock News*. I quite like *Have I Got News For You*. I generally work in silence, but sometimes I'll put on some music, like Ligeti [Gyorgy, the Hungarian composer who died last month].

Web

I use it for research, but I am not a surfer. I've got my own website [ralphsteadman.com]. Recently, I tried to buy some cocoa leaves from a website in Lima. I thought they might help my anxiety and whip me round a bit. I gave my credit card but it was refused. Then my card details turned up in Rome and someone used them. Luckily, it was only for only £350.

No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more upfront, so feel free to pull **The Blatant Plug...**

The Joke's Over, Memories of Hunter S. Thompson is published in hardback on 5 October by Heinemann, priced £20.



it's your gibberish about his gibberish?" He just dismissed it out of hand. And he never said a thing about my Leonardo book, even though I was very proud of it. The thing is, I had other forms of expression and laced in-between all the gonzo work I did children's books and loads of other stuff. I had to get away from his influence, but he didn't do much else. Hunter had talent in spades, but I think he was a bit ashamed. He tried his one novel — *The Rum Diary* — but I don't think much of it. I think the problem is he needed real people to respond to. He was an archetypal journalist, but with an extra edge that set him aside from everyone else. Certainly, in later years, I think he was jealous of my work.

What do you think about Hunter committing suicide and what was it like at the memorial service to fire his ashes into the sky?

Hunter kept saying that he would do it, but I didn't think he actually would. I drew lots of pictures of him from '79 onwards, with the top of his head blown off — that seems strange now. I don't like it much and I don't like to think about it. I think it leaves behind a hell of a lot of pain. It has traumatised his son, Juan, and I think it even traumatised Johnny Depp for a while. Johnny admired him so much. He thought Hunter was the bee's knees, the way he ran his life. He had suddenly found a new friend, but then he lost him. You know, Johnny spent \$4 million (£2.2m) on the ceremony and on building that canon monument — that's how much he cared for Hunter. The event was a little bit too Hollywood for me, but that is what Hunter wanted.

Please feel free to tell me to piss off, Ralph, but is there any chance of you doing a small drawing of me? The art editor thought we could drop it in as a picture byline.

Er, yeah, we could have a go. [He seems to agree by way of an apology and a wilful distraction. He finds a piece of A3 paper and nonchalantly dips his italic pen in some ink. We discuss his *Fantasy Flyers* while he peers at me and draws absent-mindedly.]

No matter how painful it has been, you must be proud of the book and pleased that your version will be out there?

I think I have just sort of put it to bed. I'm sorry, I am slow at the moment. You know, I am fairly morose generally, and the older I get I think it bodes ill. I have just turned 70 and I thought: Oh, fucking hell, now what? Some people see it as great — they'll retire, but not me, I wonder what I will do.

[Finally, he blobs in some blue water colour for the eyes, then looks at the cartoon with exasperation.] Ah, shit! I can't even bloody draw any more either. [Examining the cartoon and me] I suppose it does look like you in a way, but, I don't know. [He begins signing the picture and suddenly realises what he is doing.] You know, Rob, I never do this! This is the first original I have given away since I don't know when. [I offer to pay.] No, it's all right, you can have this for free, for all the pain you've caused by trying to get me to talk about something I particularly don't want to talk about. [Then, smiling with that maverick twinkle in his eye, he dunks the pen deep into the ink and flicks his unmistakable splash motif across the page in a boyish flourish. He snorts happily. It is a good way to end. There's plenty of mischievous ink in Steadman yet.]

A longer version of this interview can be read at www.robmcgibbon.com

Sorry to ask about the depression again, but how serious was it and do you think it has entirely lifted? Maybe, once the book is out it will be quite liberating for you...

It was pretty much on all the time. I went to the doctor and she said: "You are a shadow of your former self." I just started to talk to her about it and... well, I just don't know what it's all about any more. Hunter was a reason for living, creatively. I am just finished with this [he looks disdainfully around the studio]. She gave me these anti-depressant pills and I took two of them, but I knew I wasn't going to stick on them and threw them away. If I have anything, I will have a diazepam once in a while, just to send me to sleep. I suppose I am pleased to get the memories out, but I am now kind of worried. I say to myself: "Is that it now? Is that all there is? Is there nothing else?"

Can you tell me about the last bit of work you did with Hunter and what was his state of mind?

It was on Bush [during the re-election campaign of 2004] and I have still not been able to do it. Hunter said: "Ralph, if we don't kick ass we are going to get our asses kicked." Hunter thought we were finished if he got back in. He was very worried about it all and I think that is part of the reason he... Hunter took it all very badly. This man was fucking with his Constitution. Hunter called me and said: "Ralph, I want you to draw the absolute personification of evil." He left several messages on my machine — I still have the tape recording — but I could not quite do it. I came out with skeletal figures in the desert and a cow's head, which is Bush, but I never got it done.

It is clear that this book has brought up a lot of stuff for you...

Amazingly enough, I don't know where it all dredged up from. I think I did it all in a state of shock. I found that I could talk about him like somebody who was almost a stranger to him. We were like chalk and cheese, you know. It is very funny, because maybe I am suffering from a post-creative vacuum. I almost have a hangover from it. It is a kind of manual to what it was like to be in gonzo and what was gonzo. [We meander through various disjointed memories of the gonzo days.]

Clearly, Hunter had a massive impact on your life. How would you sum that up?

He brought out something in me which I had not experienced in my time working in England in the 1960s. I got butterflies in my stomach when I was drawing, everything felt dangerous. It moved me from average to the fast lane, by just the challenge of trying to express what he was writing about. It was as though I was some sort of terrorist, although at the time that was not known as it is now. With his words, drawing became a weapon and was more than just drawing. I had always felt that drawing should be that way. I suddenly realised that cartooning was something real and I was not doing just funny stuff anymore. There seemed to be a greater purpose.

I also sense that it was not always an entirely enjoyable partnership. Deep down, did you actually like him?

I did like him, actually, in a strange kind of way. Anna didn't like him and she was right about him — he was quite a brutal man. Sometimes he was pretty cruel to me, like he was to his son and to the women in his life. He treated me like any other dog, really. He was also a thieving cheat. But he also had his soft side, which he tried to hide. He had sentimental things on his wall that showed a kind side to him... sayings from Khalil Gibran like: "Beauty is not in the face, beauty is a place in the heart." And Oscar Wilde's: "Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?"

A lot of people loved him to bits, but he was quite brutal in his treatment of friends. He was fairly merciless in some ways. He had a mynah bird — Edward — and he would put his hand inside the cage, grab the bird and say: "Edward, there is no bird God who's going to save you now." He would also grab his son's ear and twist him round. It was supposed to be funny, but I don't think he knew any boundaries.

In what way was he cruel to you and was there a degree of creative competitiveness between the two of you?

He was cruel about my writing, but I always said I could write better than he could draw. When I did a book on Sigmund Freud, Hunter said: "Oh, I guess

Ralph Steadman's FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

Fuck, I didn't know I was going to do an exam! How about "George Bush Hangs Himself"? That man is a real bastard. And he calls himself a bloody Christian!

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

"Ralph Steadman Not 70" would be nice. No, "Ralph Steadman Wins The Nobel Peace Prize". That's the one we need, something objective.

Who would you most like to interview?

I could say Picasso, because he is such an inspiration to me, but I am interested in writers. They are extraordinary people and

good writers are weird. Samuel Beckett — I was fascinated by the Murphy and Malloy novels. I'd ask, Does he have any unhealthy habits?

What question would you never answer?

I suppose stuff about my personal life. People think I must be weird, because of the drawing I have done. Well, I am a bit weird, because I can't really answer your questions.

What headline would you like on your obituary?

"Miserable Old Git Kicks The Bucker". I am not really that miserable, but I feel a bit at the moment. All these questions have made me worse. It's been a horrible experience [laughs].

