INTERVIEW

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 — that seems strange now.

“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 — 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.

Anna had seen him in the October. He did it in February and we... erm... it’s quite hard to where it hadn’t been before — that was the extraordinary thing about him.

Ralph, your book is called The Joke’s Over. What is behind the title? Is that how you feel these days?

Weel, 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.
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 all the time. I went to the doctor and she said: “You are a shadow of your former self.” I just started to talk about her and... well, I just don’t know what’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 throw them away. If I have anything, I will have a diazepam once in a while, just to send myself to sleep. I suppose I am pleased to get the memories out, but I am now kind of wotted. 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 [along the re-election campaign of 2004] and I have still not been able to do it all. 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 was it for you? Did he ever say thank you?

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 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 I was 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 didn’t like him, actually, in a strange kind of way. Anna didn’t like him and she was right about him — he was 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 cebot 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.

Why did you get involved in the gonzo movement? How did you and Hunter get involved?

He called himself a bloody Christian! But he looked around with disgust at the people in the church. 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.