



PHOTO BY CHARLIE PAUL

# Ralph Steadman

Hunter S. Thompson's illustrator reflects on a life of bad craziness

BY ADAM FORREST  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Ralph Steadman was born in Merseyside in 1936 and grew up in North Wales. He found his calling in a tiny advert for a Percy V Bradshaw illustration course: "You too can learn to draw and earn £££s". In the 1960s his work appeared in *Punch* and *Private Eye*, but it was meeting writer Hunter S. Thompson while covering the 1970 Kentucky Derby that would change his life. The duo's journalistic adventures, a freewheeling blend of fact and fiction known as Gonzo journalism, influenced a generation of writers and satirists.

Warren Hinckle III, the editor who first put them together, thought Steadman's drawings were "evil-minded, twisted". And in a new documentary film on his work, featuring Steadman fan Johnny Depp, *Rolling Stone* founder Jann Wenner says "Ralph was willing to go to extremes that Hunter was not... in terms of the mental, moral, philosophical."

Today, the man whose ferocious depictions of the American psyche made him a hero of the counter-culture, looks and sounds as gentle as a Welsh choir-boy. The *Big Issue* spoke to Steadman, now 78, at his house in the tiny Kent village of Loose, shortly after he finished off his brilliant,

brand new work for our latest cover.

**Adam Forrest:** *How are you Ralph?*

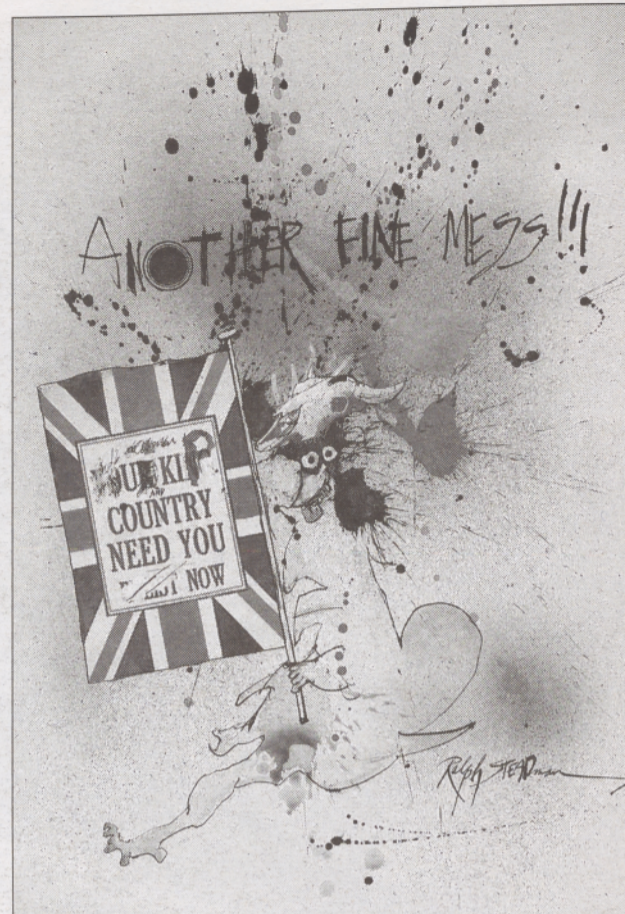
**Ralph Steadman:** Well, everything feels very biblical this morning, with all this rain. We have a Noah in the family – my grandson. And now I'm talking to an Adam. It's all very Old Testament.

**A.F.:** *What did Hunter S. Thompson think of the house, of the area in Kent? I think he called it "Steadman's Castle."*

**R.S.:** Yes, I think he liked it. He came through the back door first, hit his head because he was so tall, and muttered "Ah, servants quarters." We went to the local pub and he stared at the optics as the first measure of Chivas Regal whisky was poured. He said, "What's that? A sample? Pour a few more of those..."

**A.F.:** *I wondered if he ever complimented you on your work? Was he ever... nice?*

**R.S.:** Ha! He'd call my drawing "filthy scribbling." He did say how much he liked the illustrations for "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" (the 1972 book Thompson wrote about a drug-fueled road trip). I didn't realize it at the time, but I think he adored



Left, Ralph Steadman in his studio. Above, a special illustration Steadman penned for the *Big Issue U.K.*, part of the *International Network of Street Papers*. At right, Steadman poses with actor Johnny Depp who portrayed Steadman's friend and journalist Hunter S. Thompson.

the whole thing of having me around, actually, seeing my discomfort as we were doing these crazy things. He could be a son of a bitch. He kept a myna bird called Edward, and he'd bang the cage and shout, "Edward! There is no bird God that will save you, Edward!" And I felt like Edward in the cage sometimes (laughs).

**A.F.:** *Ever fear for your safety in his presence?*

**R.S.:** Oh no. It never crossed my mind that he was vicious or sadistic. Not at all. He was just letting the wild side of himself loose. It was mischief-making and taking risks. Gonzo journalism was submersing yourself in the story, becoming the story, and maybe learning something about yourself in the process.

**A.F.:** *You've said Hunter brought out your wild side...*

**R.S.:** Yes, he brought out the part of me that was... not a boy scout. Not a mean side, just the naughty, risk-taking side. There was plenty of booze. But the only pill I ever took was when we did a story on the America's Cup, the yacht race. He'd been gobbling pills and I was suffering from sea sickness. So he gave me a pill and it turned out to be a hallucinogenic. Anyway, he'd brought along spray paint cans and in my drug-induced stupor I suggested we spray "Fuck the Pope" on the side of the boat. But we didn't get the chance because the click-click of the spray can alerted the guard on the jetty. So Hunter cried, "We've been caught. We must flee!" And he fell backwards into the boat (laughs)... But my drawings didn't need drugs. Ink was the drug for me.

**A.F.:** *It was obviously the perfect collaboration. Do you feel lucky to have found him?*

**R.S.:** Until America, my work lacked that bite. There was a wildness missing. They were wonderful times, in America with Hunter. He was the one person in America I had to meet, was destined to meet.

**A.F.:** *Johnny Depp is a big fan and appears in the new documentary about you. What was it about Hunter that so fascinated him?*

**R.S.:** Well, I met Johnny in the 1990s when he got to know Hunter. I think he brought John Cusack to Hunter's place at Owl Farm. We got friendly, and when he came to England he was growing his hair a