

Bright side: Steadman in the garden of his house in Loose, Kent, photographed for the *New Statesman* in December 2016

The gonzo marksman

For six decades, Ralph Steadman's savage cartoons have thrilled, angered and shocked readers. He is not done yet

By Xan Rice

In the summer of 1970, a 34-year-old Welsh artist with a shock of prematurely white hair and a thick, moustache-less goatee was asked by the *Times* to draw political cartoons during the general election campaign. Idealistic and mistrustful of authority, Ralph Steadman saw little that was likeable or even distinguishable in the Conservative Party's Edward Heath and Labour's Harold Wilson. But he had four children to support from a recently ended marriage and needed a steady income, so he accepted the assignment – and got on with causing offence.

Steadman's first cartoon for the newspaper, featuring the diminutive Mr Weath and Mr Hilson, as he named them, along with the Liberal Party leader, Jeremy Thorpe, was titled *Happiness Is a Small Politician*. Another used the three faces to form the undulations of a landscape, which he called *The Wasteland*. Most memorably, he portrayed Enoch Powell as a fly sitting on

a heap of shit, with the Northern Irish unionist Ian Paisley buzzing in from the side. "Go find your own heap, Paisley!" Powell says, as Mr Weath approaches from behind with a fly swatter.

The then *Times* editor, William Rees-Mogg, worried that the drawings were inflammatory, but others on the paper liked Steadman's strange, savage style. After the election, he was offered a three-month trial as a staff cartoonist, which he took. As the letters of complaint from readers began to pile up at the newspaper, Steadman was receiving another stream of correspondence from the United States, which often started like this:

Dear Ralph . . .

You filthy twisted pervert. I'll beat your ass like a gong for that drawing you did of me . . .

The author was Hunter S Thompson, a renegade journalist who had achieved

renown in America for his book about living and riding with the Hell's Angels. The two men had met earlier that year, when *Scanlan's Monthly* magazine commissioned Steadman to join Thompson at the Kentucky Derby horse race and provide pen-and-ink illustrations for his article.

The collaboration started badly – Thompson greeted Steadman with the line, "They told me you were weird, but not that weird" – and got worse. Steadman showed some of the locals the grotesque portraits he had drawn of them and came close to being beaten up. Thompson, who was six foot three, drunk and ill-tempered, sprayed Steadman with Mace. Yet when the magazine published their work, under the headline "The Kentucky Derby is decadent and depraved", it caused a sensation in literary journalism circles. Bill Cardoso, an editor at the *Boston Globe Sunday* magazine, wrote to Thompson praising the piece, which he called "pure gonzo". Gonzo journalism ►

► – in which the reporter becomes the story – was born.

Now, a few months later, Thompson was eager to capitalise on the success by taking on more assignments with Steadman. In what he described as a “king-bitch dog-fucker of an idea”, he suggested that they travel around America and produce a series of articles “so weird and frightful as to stagger every mind in journalism”.

Steadman knew that he was not cut out for a long-term career in newspapers and so, that August, he took leave from the *Times* and flew to Newport, Rhode Island, to cover the America’s Cup yacht race for *Scanlan’s*. Though they lacked accreditation, Thompson had hired two berths on a boat – the other occupants were members of a rock band – so they could sail out and

“It was just a schoolboy prank,” Steadman says. “But if I had managed to spray the graffiti and got caught, I may never have been allowed to leave America!”

Nearly half a century has passed and Steadman is now 80, but the details of the escapade are still fresh in his mind. “Ralph, we must flee!” he says, chuckling as he imitates Thompson’s deep voice. It’s autumn and he is sitting on a stool in the kitchen of his large Georgian house in the village of Loose in Kent. With him is his second wife, Anna, and their daughter, Sadie, who lives with her husband and their two sons on the property. They are having a breakfast of boiled eggs, Marmite on toast and tea.

One of his assignments with Thompson involved shouting, “Run, you bastards!” at marathon runners in Honolulu

observe the contest. But the wind was mild and the racing boring.

With just a day of the competition left, they had no story and Steadman was seasick. He asked Thompson, who had shown no sign of discomfort on the water, for one of the little yellow pills that he had been popping. It was a bad mistake. Steadman had little experience with drugs – hallucinogens, in this case – unlike his companion.

“Hunter had no fear of the effect of drugs on his body,” he tells me, when I visit him in October. “People would come to him and say, ‘Have one of these.’ He’d eat it and then say, ‘What was that?’”

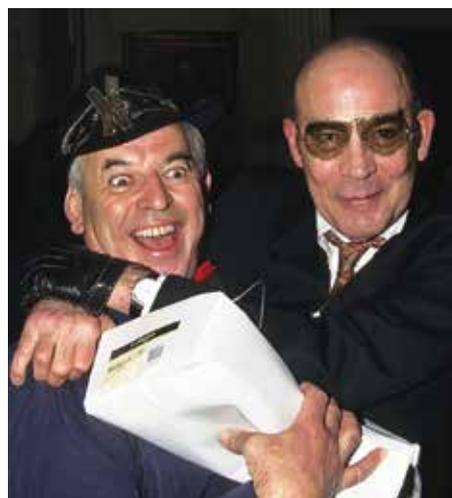
The yellow pill made Steadman feel weird and brave. That night, when Thompson produced two cans of spray paint and suggested that they row out in a dinghy to deface the racing boats – Australia’s *Gretel II* and America’s *Intrepid* – Steadman was game. As the artist, it fell on him to decide on the graffiti. He suggested spraying “FUCK THE POPE” on one of the multimillion-dollar yachts. As they approached the vessels in the darkness, Steadman shook one of the cans of paint. The clicking noise alerted a guard on the jetty, who pointed his torch and shouted at the trespassers.

“Ralph, we must flee!” Thompson said, and frantically rowed the dinghy away from the yachts. To distract the police, he fired two flares towards the harbour, one of which landed on the wooden deck of a boat. He and Steadman caught a lift on a passing fishing boat and escaped the scene.

Steadman wears two fleeces over his grey-and-white-striped shirt, a necklace with several shiny pendants, navy trousers and black leather slip-on shoes. He’s still warming up after spending 15 minutes in the pool in his back garden, swimming a few lengths and then jogging through the water, as he does most mornings, even through the winter.

He dislikes sport (one of his reporting assignments with Thompson involved shouting, “Run, you bastards!” at competitors in the Honolulu Marathon in Hawaii), and being out in the elements is more important to him than the health benefits of the exercise.

“At one point in my life, I did wonder, ‘Why does the human heart keep beating?’”



Hellraisers: with Hunter S Thompson in 1996

he tells me. “But I am over that.”

Seeing my notebook, he takes his own out of his pocket, a small, soft-cover version that he always keeps with him. He thumbs through it and shows me what he has written: “Gonzo-koala – DRAW! . . . Senet – old Egyptian game . . .”

“How did I find that out?” he wonders. “I don’t know. I’m properly ill-informed.”

He is not, of course. He may be best known for his brutal ink-blot cartoons, which have appeared in many of the world’s leading English-language newspapers and magazines, but he has also written and illustrated books about Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud, fine wine and God, among other things.

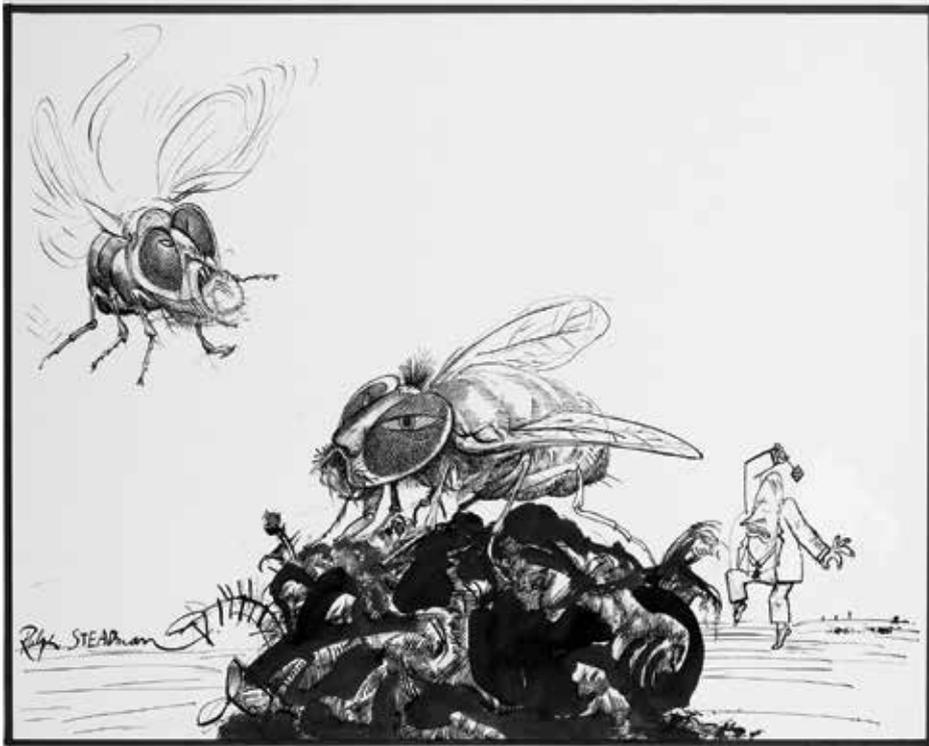
And though his most famous collaborator is gone – Thompson, depressed and struggling with chronic medical problems, committed suicide in 2005, aged 67 – Steadman has shown no sign of laying down his nib pen and paintbrush. His output in recent months includes the poster for Louis Theroux’s new film on Scientology, the artwork for the indie musician Ed Harcourt’s latest album and dozens of paintings of real and imaginary creatures for his own forthcoming book *Critical Critters*.

He also continues to produce for the *New Statesman* his political drawings that reflect his dismay at the state of the world and the role of the powerful in its decay. Sometimes it’s a commission, such as the drawing of Nicola Sturgeon with tartan horns, or Nigel Farage with a braying donkey grin. At other times, it’s something that he sends in unprompted to the *NS* creative editor, Gerry Brakus, who joins me on the visit to Steadman’s house: for instance, Donald Trump as a pig wearing Stars and Stripes underpants. Titled *Porky Pie*, it ran in the paper exactly a year ago and now seems highly prescient.

“I don’t know what else to do,” he tells me, when I ask him why he keeps working. (He does not need the money.) “It can be hard to fill the hours, so I try to make a mark every day.”

Ralph Steadman was born in the town of Wallasey, near Liverpool, in 1936. His mother was a Welsh coal miner’s daughter who had dreamed of being a teacher but ended up as a shopgirl at a branch of the T J Hughes department store. His father was a commercial traveller who sold ladies’ costumes out of a van but wanted to build cars.

When war broke out and the German bombs started falling, Steadman’s mother would rush him and his sister to an Anderson air-raid shelter, where she knitted to try to stay calm. Eventually, the danger became



Enoch Powell sits on a dunghheap as Ian Paisley flies close and Mr Weath prepares to strike (1970)

too great. “Father drove us out in the middle of the night in his Rover car. I was four and my sister was eight. We ended up in Abergele in Wales and stayed with one of my father’s customers, Mrs Hudson. My mother did not like it, but we could not go back,” Steadman tells me.

As a child, he showed little sign of rebellion or artistic talent. He was a choirboy and a Boy Scout, neither of which especially pleased his father, “a lovely fellow” whose experiences in the First World War had left him mistrustful of God and anything militaristic. Steadman liked to build model planes and hoped to become an aircraft engineer. After leaving Abergele Grammar School at 16, he was taken on as an apprentice by de Havilland Aircraft Company in Broughton, Flintshire. He learned technical drawing – circles and straight lines would later mark his art – but hated factory life, and quit within a year.

Unsure of what he wanted to do with his life, he took a job at Woolworths in Colwyn Bay, in north Wales. One day, while sweeping outside the entrance to the shop, his old headmaster walked past. “He was a vicious bastard, who would cane boys whenever he could,” Steadman says. “He sneered and said, ‘Look at you – you could have been something if you had stayed on at de Havilland. Now you are sweeping the streets in Colwyn Bay.’”

“I was mortified. I should have said, ‘At least it’s honest work.’ Authority is the mask of violence – I believe that.”

His next job was as a tea boy at a small advertising company, where he saw in a brochure an advert for Percy V Bradshaw’s Press Art School that said: “You, too, can learn to draw and earn pounds.” The correspondence course cost £12 for 12 lessons and an extra £5 to study cartooning. That second part especially appealed to Steadman, whose father had introduced him to Giles cartoons years earlier.

His parents paid for the course, which he completed while doing his two years of national service as a radar operator in the RAF. “I would sit on my bed, drawing pictures of my boots,” he says. Soon, he was proficient enough to start sending off his work to regional newspapers, such as the *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, which published his first cartoon – about Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Suez crisis – in 1956.

After moving to London to find work, he was hired as a cartoonist for a group of newspapers distributed in the north of England. In the evenings, he took classes at East Ham Technical College, where the art teacher Leslie Richardson became his mentor.

“I wanted to learn to draw properly,” he says. “We would go to the museums of science and natural history and the Victoria and Albert, and draw for hours. That’s when art evolved for me into a fixation, or a conviction, or a compulsion.”

Who did he draw inspiration from? “They are all dead now,” he says, mentioning the French cartoonist André François and his British friend Ronald Searle, as

well as the German artists George Grosz and Otto Dix, who were prominent members of the New Objectivity movement in 1920s Germany. His daughter Sadie chimes in: “Dix’s portrait of the journalist [Sylvia von Harden], with the monocle . . .” and Steadman nods.

In the early 1960s, at Richardson’s urging, Steadman studied further at the London College of Printing and Graphic Arts while pursuing a freelance career, publishing in *Punch* and *Private Eye*. He also started illustrating books. He takes down a couple of them from a shelf in his living room, including his first one, *Fly Away Peter* (1964), about a short-necked giraffe and a bird that cannot fly, and *The Yellow Flowers*, from 1968, about the children of immigrants in Islington, north London, a subject that seems even more relevant today. He reads a few pages aloud and says approvingly, “Isn’t that sweet?”

The artwork is tame by his later standards – these are children’s books – but all the while, his style was developing. As he drew with his William Mitchell 0565 steel-nib dipping pen and Snowdon 300-grams-per-square-metre paper, his work became edgier, more instinctive, and his confidence grew. He seldom felt the need to sketch out a picture before inking it. “I always say a mistake is just an opportunity to do something different.”

Among his peers and those who followed him, Steadman’s work has been recognised as groundbreaking. “It was all about the potency of his line,” says Martin Rowson, the cartoonist and writer, who regards Steadman as one of the most brilliant illustrators of the 20th and 21st centuries. “Very early on, Ralph found the courage not to care about the niceties of the line. It was so rough – like dirty sex, not airbrushed pornography. He’s a true artist.”

We are meant to be going for an early lunch at a pub, and Steadman’s wife, Anna, and Sadie are trying to hurry him along. But he keeps brushing them off, saying, “This is part of the story.”

In an adjoining sitting room, he picks up a black box that looks like a walkie-talkie and a smaller box with a button. He presses it and the larger box emits a loud fart sound. And then another, with a different pitch. He keeps pressing the button on the Fart Machine No 2 – Boom Box Blaster, a gift from a friend in the United States. Now he is laughing uncontrollably, his eyes watering, as he dances a little jig, poking out his bum. “You have to get one, it’s the best,” he says. “There’s nothing funnier than a fart.”

I’m not sure how his mother-in-law feels about that. When she came over to the ▶

► house one recent Christmas, the fart machine was hidden underneath the couch where she sat, to the delight of the great-grandchildren – and Steadman.

We all squeeze into Anna's car for the drive to the nearby Chequers Inn, which sits beside a pretty stream. Anna and Ralph, who have been together for 46 years, have been coming

'Give him a Chivas, double.' So he does, and Hunter looks at him and says, 'What's that? A sample?'

Steadman doesn't usually drink in the day, but he allows himself a half-pint of Rockin Robin, a local ale.

Despite the disaster of the America's Cup story, his partnership with Thompson flourished. Their best-known collaboration is "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas", which was first published in *Rolling Stone*

In the US, he also covered the Watergate hearings, which confirmed his deep dislike for most politicians. He continued to savage them with his pen, drawing political cartoons for the *New Statesman* from 1976 to 1980. By the late 1980s, however, his disillusionment with Margaret Thatcher's Tories – and the money-obsessed British society that they had created – was so great that he resolved to stop drawing politicians altogether.

When he resumed in 1997, while covering the election campaign for this magazine, he refused to draw any politician's face, only their legs. Today, he does the whole body, though not because his opinion of them has changed. If anything, it has sunk even lower. "Back in the Seventies, they were real politicians, even if they were crooked, like Nixon. Now it's all fatuous," he says.

He holds Nigel Farage in special contempt for his role in getting Britain out of the European Union, "our biggest mistake". "He's a bastard among them. He said he wants his life back [after the Brexit campaign]. Fine, but you've buggered it up for everyone else. We were part of something great. Now we are an offshore island."

Are there any politicians he has admired? "Denis Healey. What a lovely man. A good man and a good politician," he tells me. "A consummate human being."

And of the current crop? "Owen Smith pissed me off. I like Hilary Benn. Chuka Umunna is interesting."

Labour has "had it", he says. "[Jeremy] Corbyn has a passive approach to leadership. I wish he would assert himself in a left-wing way. Do something for the workers."

When I meet him, the US presidential election is still a few weeks away, and Steadman has faith that the American people will do the right thing. "Hillary [Clinton] will be all right. Trump is unthinkable. A thug and a molester. Who wants him?" he says.

In late November, I call him on the telephone and I ask what he thinks about President-Elect Trump. Steadman pauses and then says: "Where is Lee Harvey Oswald when you really need him?"

Steadman's work may be searing, and his opinions strong, but in person he is warm-hearted, funny and generous. At the pub, he tips the staff on the way out even though I've already left a tip when paying the bill.

Back at the house, he insists on going into the garden to pick some apples for the *New Statesman's* Gerry to take home. On a table in the living room, he keeps a Lamy fountain pen and a bottle of ink so he can write a dedication in the books that he gives away to visitors, his tongue out, flicking ►

Steadman holds Nigel Farage in special contempt. "He's buggered it up for everyone else," he says

here since they bought their house in Loose in 1980. The pub recently hosted Steadman's 80th birthday party, at which the festivities were enlivened by magic mushrooms ("brought by some Americans") and fistfights between some inebriated guests. Hunter S Thompson would have approved.

"I once brought Hunter here," Steadman says, as we sit down. "I said to the barman:

magazine in 1971, and then as a book. That style of reporting and writing, with its fuzzy distinctions between non-fiction and fiction and its subjective focus, became a significant part of the New Journalism movement in the US, whose other practitioners included Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion.

Steadman did not accompany Thompson on his drug-fuelled road trip to Las Vegas – he did the illustrations from London, after reading the manuscript. But they were together three years later, in 1974, when *Rolling Stone* sent them to Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), for the "Rumble in the Jungle" boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. After spending weeks in the city, and many thousands of dollars in expenses, Thompson decided that the fight wasn't worth seeing and gave away his and Steadman's tickets. On the day of the bout, he took a huge bag of marijuana from his hotel room and poured it into the swimming pool. "He put whiskey in a bucket by the pool and then dived in, swimming in the grass," Steadman says.

It was gonzo taken to its extreme – Steadman thinks that the term means "unhinged", after the Portuguese word for "hinge" – and beyond. Their article about one of the seminal sporting events of the 20th century was never printed. "It was the biggest fucked-up story in the history of journalism," he says.

Even so, it did not do their careers much harm. "You could do a bit in those days, have some fun," Steadman says. "Today, journalism has become more robotic. People don't do things so experimentally, and newspapers have lost their idiosyncratic nature. The media is in a more controlled, restricted state – more like an assembly hall full of schoolchildren."

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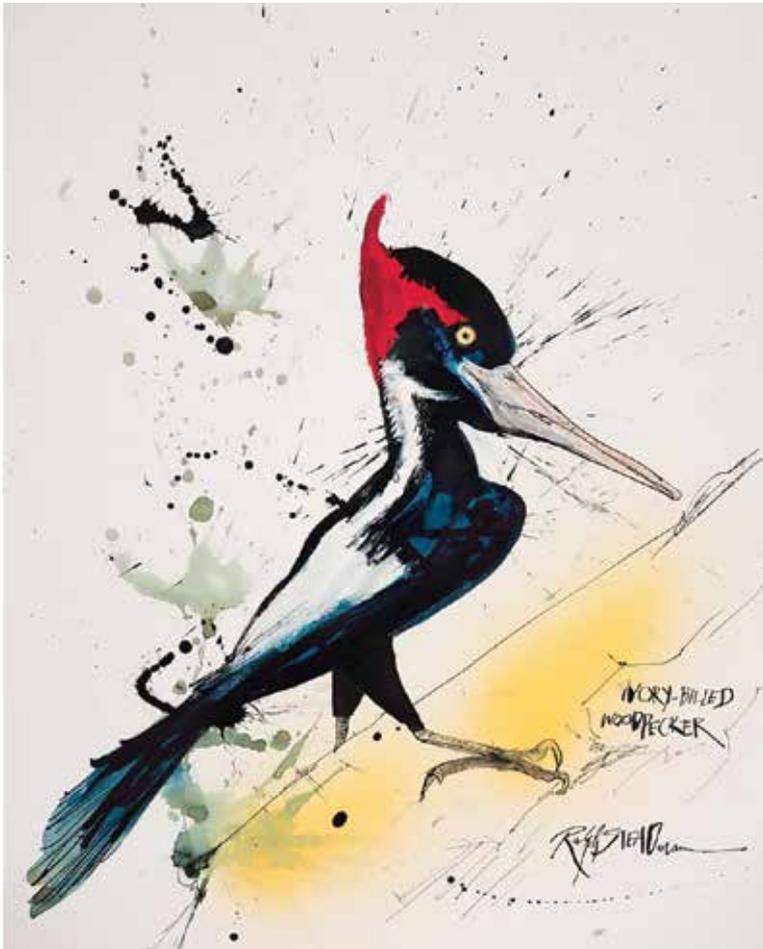
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Lethal ink: (clockwise from top left) from the book *Nextinction*, an image to mark the centenary of the First World War, and *Police – Butt Heads* (1983)



Farewell, my brilliant friend: a portrait of Thompson, drawn after his suicide in 2005

▶ his wrist to send the black liquid splattering across the page.

“My mother always said, ‘I don’t want to be a bother.’ I like that. I’ve only ever been a bother to people doing my drawings,” he says. (The America’s Cup security guard and the marathon runners in Honolulu may dispute that.)

Asked if he has any regrets, he thinks for a moment and then asks for the name of a British-Scandinavian broadcaster. Sandi Toksvig? “Yes, that’s her. When I spoke to her once, I said: ‘Pity about the voice.’ She has a slightly masculine voice. That has always stayed with me. It was a very rude thing that I should never have said to her.”

The walls of his home are covered in his original art, which he resolved not to sell

and some light entertainment in the evening, such as *Strictly Come Dancing*. “I was quite interested in Judge Rinder [Robert Rinder, a contestant on the show]. He did a somersault.”

Yet the studio is still the place he feels most content. “It’s a mess at the moment,” Sadie says, before we go there.

“Most of the mess is your tidying up!” Steadman replies.

The studio is set away from the house and looks out over a field of apple trees. On the walk there, I spot a porcelain toilet that has been repurposed as a flowerpot. “It’s a beautiful toilet! It came out of my house,” Steadman says.

“Satirical artists don’t get the plaudits,” Dave Brown says. “You won’t see them winning the Turner Prize”

after being burned early in his career when his agent advised him to let *Rolling Stone’s* owner, Jann Wenner, buy some of the *Fear and Loathing* drawings for \$75 apiece.

The largest artwork in his home is also the one that took him the longest: a one-third-size replica of Leonardo da Vinci’s 15th-century mural *The Last Supper*, which Steadman painted on to his bedroom wall using egg-white paint. “I started in 1984 and it took me 18 months,” he says.

Below the painting, next to his side of the bed, is a pile of paperbacks that is as tall as a side table. Hunter S Thompson’s novel *The Rum Diary* is near the top of the stack. After Thompson shot himself in the head in 2005, Steadman flew to Colorado to help instal a monument that the two of them had agreed on in the 1970s – a 47-metre-tall silver “cannon” topped with a double-thumbed fist clutching a button of peyote, a cactus with psychoactive properties. Thompson’s ashes were fired out of the top. The actor Johnny Depp, a friend of Thompson and Steadman, picked up the bill.

Among the ornaments hanging from Steadman’s necklace – which also include a silver toothpick, an animal tooth and a silver-and-turquoise Navajo piece that he bought in 1973 – is a tiny clay head that Thompson gave to him.

“He told me, ‘Wear it Ralph: it will ward off evil spirits.’” Later, looking at a photo of Thompson in the living room, he says: “I miss him.”

Besides reading, Steadman enjoys watching television: the news in the morning

The studio, which has several rooms, is more clutter than mess, though it is true that there is paint splattered everywhere – on the walls, on the photocopier and the hairdryer. His large drawing table has a fresh sheet of paper on it, numerous bottles of Winsor & Newton ink, a tin of Caran d’Ache watercolour pencils, paintbrushes, nib pens, glue and scissors.

Besides the digital camera positioned over the table, it’s all low-tech. Steadman still works in the manner he did in the 1970s. “We live in such a self-contained electronic community now. People do things on the computer. There’s no wet ink any more.”

He’s not a technophobe, though. Around the corner, in a narrow office, is a desktop computer, which he uses to answer email



Walk the line: Steadman near his local pub

and send digital copies of his work to publishers. He enjoys using Skype, because he can see the person he is talking to. But he has no interest in social media, which he views as enabling malevolence, or smartphones.

“I’m worried about the world for my grandkids. People spend all their time looking at their phones with their headphones on,” he says.

He prefers to be alive to the world and its creatures. “When I am in the pool, I listen to the birds. I blow my bird whistle and you can hear the birds calling.”

In his studio, he does not have to look far for inspiration. On the wall are pictures of the American comedian W C Fields and printouts of Dylan Thomas’s poem “Fern Hill” and Oscar Wilde’s “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young”. Behind his drawing desk is a mini-shrine to Picasso, who Steadman calls a “huge influence” – he once made a triptych called *Gonzo Guernica* – for his artistic genius and his work ethic. Picasso made art into his nineties.

Steadman’s legacy is assured, even if he has not received all of the accolades that some feel he deserves. “Ralph is not just a cartoonist, he’s an artist, and he’s been hugely influential,” says Dave Brown, the *Independent’s* political cartoonist. “But satirical artists don’t get the plaudits – you won’t see them winning the Turner Prize.”

Sometimes, when he’s working, Steadman breaks off to play music; a penny whistle, pan pipes and a ukulele are part of the clutter. But mostly he listens. He has a rack full of audio cassettes, a turntable and albums stored digitally.

On his computer, he clicks on iTunes and calls up a nine-minute rock song called “Weird and Twisted Nights”, which he wrote the lyrics for and recorded in the late 1970s. The track alludes to Thompson’s frightening habit of driving along the highway with the headlights off so the police couldn’t see him:

Drive your stake through a
darkened heart
In a red Mercedes-Benz
The blackness hides a speeding trap
The savage beast pretends...

Steadman is the lead vocalist and has a surprisingly good, clear singing voice. Thompson contributes a single line, a gruff refrain that goes “It never really happened anyway”, before a saxophone solo by a session musician who Steadman asked to play “as if the devil has just entered the church”.

As the late-afternoon light filters through the window, Steadman leans back in his chair, lost in the music. When Thompson’s voice comes in, he smiles as he sings along: “It never really happened anyway...” ●