

“My dad told me to play the white man...”

Words by Colleen Considine

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Steve Murphy is a Luton-based photographer, a navy veteran, record collector and all-round great guy with an interesting story to tell.

A Leica in hand, a navy-blue fisherman hat, Steve is a classic photographer with a big personality. His last name being Murphy he was nicknamed Spud, given to him from the “navy”. Something that’s followed through to this day. “Anyone called Murphy is Spud, Murphy is a traditional Irish name, and obviously potatoes.”

So, ‘Spud’ it is.

Having met Steve through Andy Chesham of Vinyl Revelations, Luton. Steve is well-known in the Luton area for his awesome photography. Being a regular at the famous Luton jazz venue, The Bear Club.

You can find Steve on a Harley riding in his motorcycle club or hunting through racks of vinyl. And of course, shooting here there and everywhere on his vintage Leica M2 camera. Meeting in the newly refurbished, The Hat Factory, Steve was head to toe classic workwear. A dark pair of Levis jeans with a roll-up cuff, an army green shirt with dusty white buttons. Underneath pairing a dark blue top with a hint of a gold chain being shown. A dark green side bag full of camera equipment and of course an awesome pair of dark grey Dr Martens boots.

Steve is the coolest guy you could meet. You could spend hours listening to his fantastic stories. Or just watch him in his element casually chat to locals on the street whilst snapping them. Like me and many other music lovers, he has a very eclectic taste in music. Everything from New Orleans jazz, to prog rock, classic rock and heavy metal.

A regular visiting Andy’s record shop, today he bought Joan Baez, country, folk and more folk. Usually buying “jazz”, he’s “bought quite

a lot of that recently.” And his dad was a huge country fan, thereby growing up surrounded by country music. It’s a prominent feature in his music taste, country leads you to folk, leading you to jazz and blues and rock & roll, music is universal.

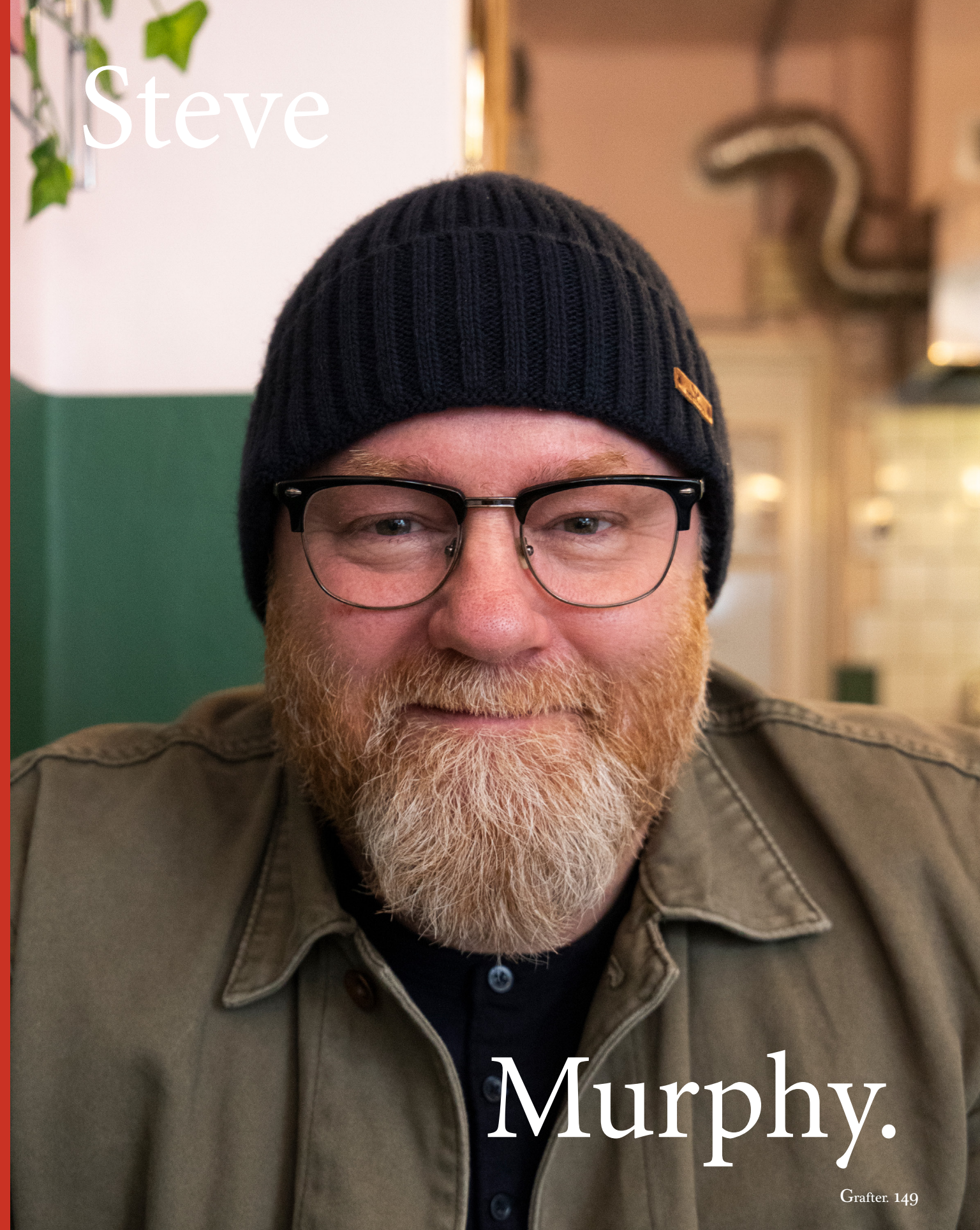
Growing-up he looked-up to his father who was an Army veteran. His dad was originally from “Dublin, Ireland, left Ireland and joined the British army”. Steve is an army veteran, having been in the navy for “15 years.” His dad “having been in the army, when filling out career’s forms, I always ticked the armed forces.” Then as he re-done his “O-levels”, studying “sociology, economics, and social history.” They were “all subjects I was passionate about.”

However, “A-levels dragged the fun out of it”. So, “one Friday morning in the career’s office, there were three buttons, army, navy or air force. Army, you’re going to be running around fields, air force, nah, and navy you’d do a lot of travelling. I always wanted to travel and thought the navy, ‘they pay you to travel the world, I’d do that!’” Being someone who’s travelled extensively, “Brazil, Russia, Canada, Bermuda, Mediterranean” his favourite place of all, “St John’s in Newfoundland” with the main reason being, “the people”, they “were so friendly”. Having gone out with “four or five lads” they ended “up in a bar with a group of boys and girls”. But as “the bar closed” they ended up “back at their place, we just sat in the front room, eating pizza, drinking, talking all night, all of a sudden the sun was coming up and we thought, ‘Oh, we had better get back to the ship!’ it was a really cool moment.”

We of course started talking about photography,

Having got into photography at “19/20. A friend of mine, his brother was a photographer had taken a picture of his

Steve



Murphy.

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girlfriend at the time. Very arty, black and white, lit perfectly, and I was just so impressed with it.” Once you get into photography, it’s a rabbit hole you find yourself falling deeper into. This took him to “Ansel Adams, black and white landscape” and in the early 20s found a book by “David Bailey called, NW1” that was his “influence”. With “a large format camera, some early Sunday mornings, no people, he’s taken pictures of buildings and architecture”. A tagline from the book, “trying to promote a body of work of architecture that didn’t have any visual stimulus.” Steve goes for black and white photography and since “I was 18, I would always go for a dark alleyway, old bricks and cobbles with dirty cans and things, I’ve stuck with it.”

A great eye for life as it is, snapping society and culture in its raw material. Causally walking up to people, or sneaking behind them, capturing them from the side. He didn’t always do street photography, he used to “do weddings and corporate stuff” and there was one in particular “I didn’t enjoy”. “she really enjoyed the photographs, but we didn’t click, and I felt I could have done a better job.” And “I felt if I can’t do my best then it might show within the photographs.” So “I haven’t done another wedding since that.” Having “drifted in and out of photography, for the last 8 years I’ve done it a bit more.”

Like his dad, Steve is a “mellow” fellow. His dad “never raised his voice.” Instead, “he gave you this look, there was this term he would say, ‘play the white man’ as in the cowboys and Indians, he would never get angry.” Seeming to take everything in his stride, very relaxed he doesn’t “do routines.”, it’s about doing things in “pace”. Steve is a happy, jolly guy but he too “had depression” and “counselling worked for me, having half a dozen sessions.” But “once you’ve been down that road, you need to take time out for yourself” and “you spot the trigger, what is

the trigger? Anxiety? well, why or how have you become anxious? If you work out that reason and what that trigger is, you can spot it on the horizon.” And having had to learn techniques to help himself, he will “without telling anyone, not the wife or family, take a day off work, turn the telly off, read, listen to music, not pick-up anything, completely chill.” You have to “rejuvenate, recharge, it will come with time, doesn’t have to be a whole day take an hour”. He’s also “tried meditation” if you “can get into Buddhism, you’re wellbeing and mindfulness, breathe and get rid of thoughts, let it come in and go.” It’s about “knowing triggers, if you feel yourself getting anxious, just come back, meditate, breathe, calm down”. However, although Steve has come a long way, “I have never got over talking in public”, it’s even to the point where “someone mentioned my name when I was in the audience and I froze”.

Covered in tattoos, he started getting them, “about a year ago.” “Maybe it’s a midlife crisis, I hit 50 and started getting tattoos and riding motorbikes”. Hands that have a cool rebellious feel, with sentimental hand tattoos, that “my wife isn’t a fan of”. Steve looks and dresses like a biker, tattoos, workwear, a classic camera. As well as tattoos, cameras and bikes he recently bought a guitar and a banjo. Taking up lessons didn’t really go according to plan, so instead is learning himself off Youtube. He’s a blues kind of guy, so only seemed right to get a blues guitar, obviously he loves folk and country, hence the banjo. Don’t think he’s going to start a band just yet; he’s still got a lot of learning to do. In the meantime, you could probably catch him riding on his Harley in his motorcycle club.

Having “got into it 20 years ago” he got his first bike only “a couple of years ago”, it was “a crappy old motorbike, about £300.00” bought by his dad. However, “I didn’t have it long because I’m not a mechanic” so



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instead, Steve now has “a Harley sportster, a 1200cc, loud, very noisy”. Having a motorbike means “doing it properly, rallies, camping in a field and getting drunk. To do that stuff, I felt I had to join a motorcycle club.” In the “motorcycle world” you have to be prepared to “put the work in to be a member”, meaning, you spend “some time being the dogs body” you have to, in Steve’s case, “grab hold of it, and lift it and be the best prospect you can ever be!”

For “6 or 9 months I went to every single event, I was the barman, they all put £20 in the kitty and I was running off, picking up the beers.” Which is terrible for Steve, “because two guys would say, ‘Spud, go!’ and I’d have half of my pint left, while I was getting theirs, I’d down mine, and then someone else, then someone else, I was drinking double. I was hammered!” In the end though, “I earned my colours.” As of now Steve has bought another bike, a “sporty Yamaha, street fighter type thing, last year riding round on the Harley, a cruiser. I thought it’d be fun to ride during the summer.”

Steve is a regular at “Andy’s” Vinyl Revelations “record shop”, having an “eclectic taste” in music. But will always “migrate to your favourite genre”. Steve goes all round, a varied taste in sound, “jazz, rock, classical, all the way through to thrash and electronic.” However, “I can’t listen to thrash metal at 9am on a Monday but go to The George, a couple of pints in me and I love it!”.

Buying records usually means Andy “will set something aside, I’ll be flicking through saying, ‘oh, what’s this Andy, I like that!’, it’s playing to your audience” and that “personal touch has gone out of everything” Music is all about trying new things, but also reminds you of the past. Shortly after the interview heading over to Andy’s, Steve was in a country/folk mood. Having “heard a

country tune on the radio” earlier that week, it “reminded me of my dad.” Sound evokes memories and links to what we are interested in presently.

Social media “is one of those things you have to be able to manage yourself.” There’s a feeling of numbers, the amount of people you’re ‘friends’ with. Also, “I deleted my Facebook account and have since come back.” And the reason for deleting it, “there were ‘friends’ on there who I had never met. And even wondered who this person was I was ‘friends’ with.” You can find people so easily but if you “keep hold of someone you don’t even like why are you friends with them!?” People from high school, “we weren’t friends at school, we haven’t spoken for 35 years, why now? I think they are just nosy.” Steve has often found himself “arguing with people on Facebook” and maybe “it’s an alter ego. The person on Facebook is the true person but when it comes face to face, I can’t be asked to argue.”

Outside of his normal career of project managing advertorials for brands like Gap and riding in his motorcycle club Steve created a magazine for the homeless, called Base 5. Made a couple of years ago, photos were shot in Luton, London and New York.

Shooting homeless people as they are, as a way to raise awareness of the people on our local streets. Giving people a voice who are often passed on the street. The magazine featured a range of Luton-based photographers and artists. Interview features with homeless people themselves, giving them a platform for their often-lost voice.

No doubt Steve will pop-up again somewhere with another new project.

