

Kurt Vonnegut

A friend

Ralph Steadman

I hardly knew him. He appeared in my life like a rare butterfly. Why should I have known him? He was a writer and an American. I am an artist and Welsh. But in spite of that, we did meet – a mere five years ago – and still hardly struck up what people call a friendship. But then there was Joe Petro III, who knew us both. Joe is another artist and a printer of fine things. Joe made sure that we did meet and whether we wanted to or not, we were going to get on – because Joe said so. Kurt thought that Joe was God because Joe had somehow transformed us two into first cousins. It was a pretty neat trick.

Joe also printed for the both of us and Joe prints what is dear to both of us – our very own work.

That was how Kurt and I got friendly – very slowly – the best of possible ways. I had been aware of the huge legacy that is Kurt through his mass of writing – and especially his love of Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln. One of Kurt's books is called BLUEBEARD, a story about Kurt and art, Kurt and his opinions of artists and his general philosophy of life and art. I knew instinctively that I would like him if I ever met him. I knew that what he really wanted to be was an artist and when I did meet him he had become one. He had more or less written all the words he would ever want to write. Kurt also knew particular heroes of mine like Saul Steinberg, the cartoonist, and Jackson Pollock the painter, expert dribbler and blotting master.

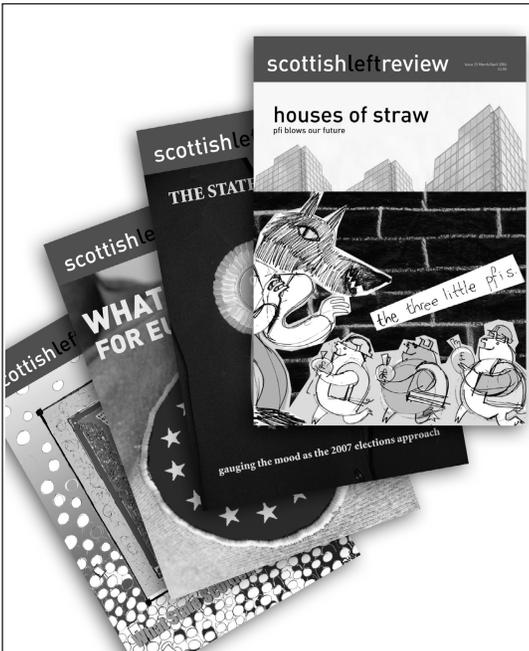
Kurt too became the best of artists, the kind who makes fearless marks on paper which mean what he wants them to mean. They are marks of intent and they are very much a shorthand way of reaching out and saying HI! to a complete stranger who just happens to have bought one of these marks as a print. Kurt's pride was that a complete stranger would actually hang one of these prints on their wall.

Meeting Kurt and getting to know him was both a delight and a journey of infinite possibilities. He enjoyed his food, his

Facing page: Ralph Steadman's last drawing of Kurt Vonnegut on a table cloth, after lunch at his favourite restaurant in New York called Ristorante Lasagne. More of Ralph's work can be found online (www.ralphsteadman.com).

‘Manhattans’ and his cigarettes. It was the cigarettes that were supposed to kill him. He tried hard with that in mind, but when they didn’t kill him Kurt was going to sue the Tobacco Companies for making false claims on their packets that SMOKING KILLS. Instead he died in such a dumb-assed way by falling down the steep stone steps of his brownstone house on 48th street in New York. He lay in a coma for weeks and for those of us who knew, we wished him to wake up and reach out for his cigarettes, so that he could go on killing himself in his own way.

Kurt Vonnegut was uncomplicated, modest and so witty ... the second great writer I had known who fell off the landscape of my mind like a monumental cliff face. He never got to read the last letter I had sent him a week earlier and I can’t remember now what it said.



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