

STEVEN SAWYER

ROCKIN' THE TITLE

Words by Lucy Small



(top) The 2018 WSL World Champ . . . happy-as. (above) Roots, rock, reggae . . .



Steven Sawyer is someone that people pause to listen to. His demeanour, at first glance, is perpetually cool. On further examination his personality is draped over a deep kind of earnestness. Maybe it's a product of the tumultuous South African wilderness, or perhaps it's the remote African coastlines he's been lost in, either way he wears his outfit of surfer and musician combination pretty darn well.

I interviewed him on the phone while he ate a pizza in Venice Beach, California. Fresh off a spontaneous New Year's snowboarding trip to Tahoe, Steve's voice buzzed as he described deciding to fly to California from

his hometown of Jeffreys Bay, for his first ever wintertime New Year's celebration.

"I couldn't turn down a white New Year, I've always had New Year in stinking hot summer," he laughs. He is also there to release two new songs that he recorded in LA last year. Steve is excited.

He also won a World Title in November.

I first met Steve somewhere in the lower section down past Supertubes, Jeffreys Bay, back in 2014. I was struck by his kind of hometown cool, his deep bluesy vocals that rang out over the J-Bay Open and his obvious thrill of seeing Kelly Slater and Tom Curren up on stage one night during the

contest. In some ways things have changed a lot since then, but in some ways they haven't. At the time I thought Steve was a talented shortboarder who only hung toes when the waves were small, spending most of his time somewhere up past Boneyards pulling into backhand barrels. A talented shortboarder he is indeed, surfing as a wildcard in the J-Bay Open in 2016 as well as, on multiple occasions, disappearing to chase elusive, dusty lefthand point breaks somewhere along the desolate Namibian coastline.

But for Steve, longboarding is no longer a side-dish.

Backhand jamming at Lower Trestles during Surf Relik. *Photo: Myles McGuinness*

He's well versed in his discussion of winning the world title when we chat. It's a few months since his nail-biting victory went down in Taiwan and he seems to have taken the time to process what it really means to be world champ. "The title for me was pretty interesting," he said. "Thinking about Andy Irons killing himself after a world title or three, you think 'dang I just won the World Title and now I'm back home washing the dishes just an hour afterwards.'"

He continues: "I kind of thought, 'whoa, I

can totally see how you can miss the point of what winning a World Title can be.' It's not about the title, it's about everything that comes with the title. Now you have been given a torch to work with and you can use it however you want." Here Steve pauses, his words are chosen carefully as he provides an insight into what a World Title actually means. "It's been a big realisation and it's actually made me so much more stoked. It's not like that was it and now I just have to train to get another one," he said. "I am definitely going to

train to get another one though," he adds, chuckling.

Despite his easy laugh, Steve's comments are weighted by sincerity, taking moments to think about how best to explain the sense of duty attached to being a world champion. "I came second a few years ago in China, but that wasn't the right time for me to win it," he said. "After I got second, I thought that I was on top, that I didn't have to come from behind anymore and my whole strategy was based around that. The following year I blew it because I thought I



Splitting the peak, Lower Trestles in the warm-up for Surf Relik. Photo: Myles McGuinness

didn't have to chase it . . . You can pretend that you know what it's like to be at the top, but you actually can't have that mentality when you're surfing. You're not the top dog, anyone can beat you." Steve said.

"It's the same kind of principle with what comes with the title. You can say you're on the top because you've got the title, but it's definitely not going to work for you . . . Coming with that, it's opening up the music, it's opening up relationships with people, it's opening doors big time. So, I would love to use that and not abuse it in any way,"

he says, his optimism clearly hinged on a strong sense of duty.

He defeated Kai Sallas in small waves in the southeast of Taiwan in the final of the WSL World Longboard Championship. He was in the lead until the last few minutes when a set came in, Kai got the first wave and Steve the second, the verdict still in limbo when both surfers arrived on the beach. Steve describes the moment it happened, a surreal realisation that he was bringing the world title to South Africa.

"The results came out online before they

announced them on the beach, so we were standing there waiting and then I just heard my corner start hooting and screaming. I couldn't believe it," he said.

"It was such an amazing thing this year, I had such a good support crew and guys on the beach. It was interesting how it felt compared to travelling alone, travelling with a national team like to the ISA or travelling with a crew of guys, your own team."



Flowing through the moves at Taiwan's Jinzun Harbour on the way to the title. *Photos: Andrew Carruthers*



A few snaps from a well documented life.



Loving it at his local. Steve was an invited wildcard at the 2016 WSL J-Bay Open. Here's why. *Photos: Cara Sawyer*





(above and left) Logging day at the local.
 Photos: Kody McGregor
 (bottom left) California cruising.
 Photo: Myles McGuinness

Steve's surfing is striking. His style is kind of squared off, deep bottom turn to drop-knee cutback combos with his body staying angular to the wave, his back straight in a nod to traditional style. He's quick on his feet, at no point seeming to lose control of any part of his body or board, his backhand read on a wave an obvious product of South African righthand points. His moustache flails in the wind as he stomps the tail at the peak of a cutback to the whitewater, all the while his feet stay close together, perfectly under his bodyweight, surfing with complete control.

I like Steve's blend of progression and tradition in longboarding. It's as if he has combed over both approaches to surfing and chosen his favourite parts, figured out how they can flow into each other and practised until he knew no different. I suppose it's to be expected when you grow up somewhere like J-Bay.

Steve now works in the workshop with his dad Des, a classic legend and craftsman. He started shaping boards in the '60s and '70s in Cape Town, later relocating to Jeffreys and continuing his board building. Des is also the kind of guy, that when he speaks people stop to listen. Not because there is any kind of fierceness to him, but because his bank of knowledge of surfboards, matters of the heart and whatever else you might have some grey confusion about, seems to extend deep into the far reaches of infinity and is dishd out with the same blend of earnestness and cheek that has been passed on to Steve.





(above and top) Sliding the lower sections inside Supertubes.
Photos: Kody McGregor

Des also used to run a gap year program in J-Bay that involved young people from all over the world coming to study, surf and teach surfing. Steve grew up in this environment, being constantly surrounded by surfers and with one of the world's most mechanical righthand points at his doorstep, it was just a small step for Steve to reach the ocean. Des shapes, and Steve does the leg work for his own boards. He then sells them when he's overseas as a way

to help fund his contest travel expenses. He combines this with playing gigs and somehow manages to piece together the funds to travel to the far reaches of the globe to surf and make music. It sounds like he is gaining momentum, his excitement for the future of his music clear in the way he talks.

Not long after our chat he had a slot on a cruise to the Caribbean planned, a jam cruise where musicians perform all through the night as the giant ship weaves its way south through the Caribbean Sea. It's a way of building contacts and forming relationships with other musicians in hope of being able to play support gigs back on American soil and eventually gaining the same kind of musical prowess Steve has obtained in surfing.

Steve's music is this deep kind of bluesy sound. The ocean seeps into his lyrics and his songs are all drenched in heart. His upcoming release is set to be something more of a reggae sound, he explains, "We recorded four songs when I was here in LA last. Two of them were groove rock, two of them reggae. So, the idea is to release a single with a backup that's the same kind of style so you can kind of relate to the first single that has been dropped."

His voice pitches slightly as he continues, "I can't believe it's happening. There's been



Mine! Photo: Andrew Carruthers

so many years of talk about doing music and doing surfing and getting things to happen, it's crazy to see it happening," he says.

As the World Surf League reformats the World Tour in 2019, the future is brimming with promise. The hunt for the world title continues, this time across a selection of new events that are set to test the world's best surfers in a range of different conditions, locations and languages. For Steve, a world title seems like just the beginning. "Now I've won it, it's a weight off my shoulders. Not that I was trying to prove anything to anyone, but now I don't have to," he says. And it seems he plans on having some fun along the way, disappearing to a palm-hemmed beach in Mexico as I sit here hammering my keyboard. Steve seems to have the work life balance pretty wired.

Trad-styled single-fin, turning from the tip. *Photo: Matt Uppink*



Getting serious. J-Bay. *Photo: Robbie Irlam*