

**B**orn in Atlanta, Georgia in 1950, Eric Taylor's first musical recollection provides an insight into his concern for his fellow man.

"In Georgia there was a lot of black music. What was called soul music. Rhythm and blues was also a real big deal. They were called race and blue records back then. Jukeboxes in the south,

fraternity houses. We would do a set of soul and rhythm and blues music, then a set of white boy music.

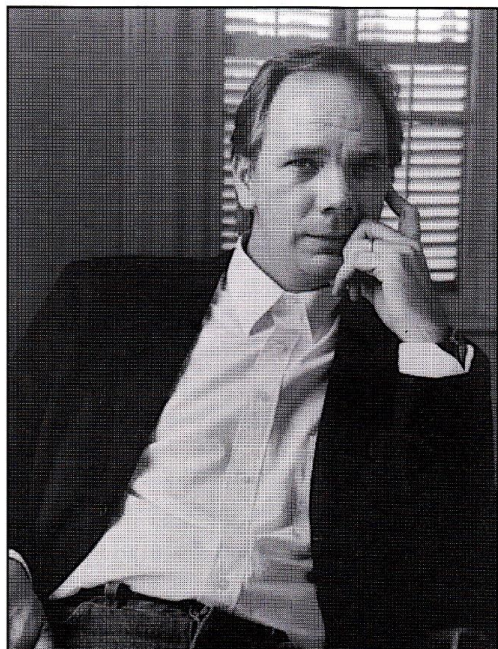
"Country music wasn't much of an influence on me then, although I do remember really liking some of Hank Williams' stuff – to me it sounded like blues music."

As his teen years drew to a close, Taylor headed to Washington D.C. to investigate both the possibility of study at Georgetown University and the burgeoning music scene. Later, after a brief return to

it. I tried to see how bad I could be, what bridge I could jump off at the time and survive it."

Despite that potentially destructive facet of their lives, Eric contends that a tremendous creative energy existed among the city's songwriting community. Through the early Seventies, writers resident in Houston included Vince Bell, Steve Earle and George Enslie. As for touring, Eric's itinerary took him to most other parts of Texas, as well as Oklahoma, Louisiana and Georgia.

In 1977, from a field of 40 finalists, Eric Taylor was among the six winners at the Kerrville Folk Festival Emerging



Known for his collaborations with  
ex-wife Nanci Griffith

## Eric Taylor

is a master impressionist who creates true to  
life tales, wistful movies and fetching  
vignettes in song

Atlanta, he joined some friends on a cross-country trek to California. Over a decade after the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, this band were intent on finding their own mythical/mystical America.

First stop on their journey was the Gulf Coast city of Houston, TX. However, circumstances dictated that Taylor set aside his plans to travel farther west, at least for a while. Financially, he was down to his last dollar.

Part-time jobs made ends meet but, more importantly, in Houston Taylor witnessed performances by blues legend Lightnin' Hopkins and two comparatively young, local singer-songwriters, Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt. He concluded that his musical education would benefit from hanging around Houston for a time.

Eric acquired a guitar, and soon became friendly with concert promoter Mike Condray. For a short while, he worked in Condray's various clubs doing various jobs, including music.

For Eric, spending time with Guy Clark was a prime opportunity to pick up tips from the master songsmith. As for the lifestyle that came with their chosen trade, Taylor comments, "Townes was busy being a legend at the time. Seeing how much he could f\*\*k himself up and get away with

Songwriters contest. Another Texas writer, albeit Austin based, who was creating a stir locally at this time was Nanci Griffith whom Taylor was soon to marry.

Early in 1978, Griffith completed *There's A Light Beyond These Woods*, her first solo album for the now defunct Austin imprint, B.F. Deal. The nine cuts included Eric's *Dollar Matinee*. Their duo rendition of the song reappeared on the 1978 Kerrville *Live Highlights* album.

Taylor and Griffith often played the listening room on the Texas A&M University campus at College Station – the booker was a journalism/German major called Lyle Lovett. Taylor and Lovett struck up a close friendship and Lyle went on to appear as Eric's opening act on a regular basis.

In 1981 Eric Taylor recorded his first album. "I wasn't interested in cutting an album. What was important was writing and playing songs. We wrote tons that we only played two or three times – that's what we did. I don't remember yearning for a record deal. The record came about because some people came along and said, 'You gotta put out a record.' I said, why? They said, 'Because we want to hear it.' I told them, you're going to lose your ass."

The album was cut at Loma Ranch Studios located on the outskirts of Fredericksburg. Co-produced by Eric and the studio owners, John and Laurie Hill,

especially in redneck bars, and mostly out of some lame attempt at humour, had records by artists like Lightnin' Hopkins.

"I was in a bar with my father called The Cotton Bottom Lounge and heard Lightnin' sing *Short Haired Woman*. All these racists in the bar thought it was a real funny song. I was about nine years old and thought it was great."

Eric Taylor purchased his first guitar at age 13 for the princely sum of \$2.50. Although it lacked tuning pegs, he soon became adept with a pair of pliers. There was another problem – he was only allowed to play it in the bathroom.

Throughout his High School years, he played bass in numerous garage bands. Considering his love of words – Eric wrote poetry and short stories from an early age – it seemed a natural progression that he start composing.

"The first song I wrote was *Trip Of The Golden Calf*. It had real heavy lyrics. Music was the thing that drove our lives. We weren't big television watchers. We worked most every weekend. Colleges,



the resulting 10-track recording was titled *Shameless Love* and released on the Featherbed label. Although Eric and Nanci were now divorced, her vocals are a prominent feature of the set. Supporting players included Gurf Morlix, James Gilmer and John Hagen, plus Eric's then flatmate, guitarist John Grimaudo.

Mentioning two of the songs from that album, Taylor says, "*Joseph Cross* is the only song that I've ever sat down and wrote from beginning to end. I had been thinking about attempting a western play. The story is a piece of fiction. *Charlie Ray McWhite* is a composite song. Basically, it's about me killing off my father in a song. He was still alive when I wrote that song. My father's name was Charlie, while his best friend went by the surname of McWhite. I have an uncle called Ray and put the three things together."

With *Shameless Love*, the world was introduced to the narrative songs of a master craftsman. Who could have foretold that a recording silence, nearly a decade and a half long, would ensue?

Featherbed issued Nanci's second solo effort, *Poet In My Window*, in 1992. Cut at Loma Ranch, Eric played bass on the sessions, while he and Brian Wood, Nanci's guitarist, are credited as producers.

The only Griffith/Taylor songwriting collaboration, *Ghost In The Music*, opened Nanci's next studio album. Cut in Nashville at Jack Clement's studio, *Once In A Very Blue Moon*, was released in 1984 on Philo, the first of an irregular but ongoing series of co-productions by Griffith and Jim Rooney. With the release of that album, the Texas songbird took flight to destinations far beyond the borders of the Lone Star state.

On the eve of his first European tour in 1983, Eric Taylor walked away from the music business and entered a rehabilitation programme. In the years that followed, he worked at a halfway house as a counsellor while studying for a professional qualification. Once accredited, he continued to play about three shows a year at Anderson Fair in Houston, and once a year at The Cactus Café, Austin's premier listening room on the UT campus.

In August 1988 and now signed to MCA, Nanci returned to Texas for her live spin at Anderson Fair. Taylor was on hand to lend his vocal to Nanci's *Love At The Five And Dime*. The subsequent video and album, *One Fair Summer Evening*, included Nanci's version of Eric's atmospheric period piece, *Deadwood, South Dakota*. Her next studio set, *Storms*, took its title from another Eric Taylor composition.

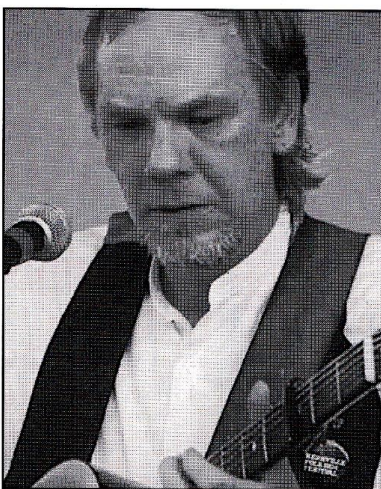
"I always had plans to come back and do this again. It wasn't because I didn't want to be in the music business. It's just that I liked what I was doing. I liked where my life was going. I liked working with

addicts and alcoholics. Helping kids and old folks and families."

Remarried, the birth of his daughter Alex at the dawn of the Nineties dictated any comeback plans be shelved temporarily. Two decades after arriving in Houston, Eric moved his family fifty miles west to the peace and quiet of Columbus, the political centre of Colorado County, Texas.

In the Nineties, English chanteuse June Tabor began interpreting Taylor's material. Her Green Linnet album, *Angel Tiger* (1992) featured *Joseph Cross*, while *Against The Streams* (1994) opened with *Shameless Love*.

During that year, Eric joined Lyle Lovett in California for the recording sessions that resulted in the MCA/Curb collection, *I*



*Love Everybody*. The Lovett/Taylor collaboration, *Fat Babies*, was included. It had been composed a decade earlier while they drove to the Kerrville Folk Festival.

Late one night, following one of the sessions for Lovett's album, Eric cut an acoustic tape of 19 songs, encouraged and abetted by Lyle. Like Nanci, Lyle Lovett had sustained a faith in Eric Taylor, musician, composer and friend.

A few months later, Eric signed a publishing deal with Polygram, and with the ability to put bread on his table he relinquished his day job and set about planning his next album, which he decided to cut for Watermelon.

Another Watermelon artist and fan of Taylor's work, Iain Matthews, was soon involved as producer, and brought Mark Hallman on board soon afterwards.

*Eric Taylor*, produced by Matthews and Hallman and cut at Mark's Austin studio, was released during the summer of 1995. From the opening Kerouac-inspired *Dean Moriarty* to the closing tale of a street-walker's pimp, *Shoeshine Boy*, the album is a sheer delight.

Thankfully, the producers avoided the pitfall of swamping Taylor's songs with

production gimmicks. Eric's words were allowed to shine through, adorned by the minimum of instrumentation. The collection included *Whooping Crane*, a song I heard Lyle Lovett perform in England circa 1988. That my goose pimple memory of the song has remained intact says much about the strength of Taylor's writing – his novelistic style stands him shoulder to shoulder with those Texas literary giants, McMurtry and McCarthy.

The recording was subsequently voted the 1996 Kerrville Folk Festival Album of the Year.

Postponed more than a decade earlier, Eric Taylor undertook his first European tour in late 1995 accompanied by David Olney, Vince Bell and Iain Matthews. In September 1996 he took part in the 50th anniversary concert for Munich Records in Utrecht. Last year, Joan Baez, who had already earmarked one of Taylor's songs for her next album, invited him to perform at a songwriter's showcase during the Newport Folk Festival. As 1997 drew to a close, Eric undertook another European tour including a 5-date solo visit to these shores. For his second UK visit in May this year, he supported Guy Clark.

Taylor's new Munich Records album, *Resurrect*, provides ample proof that there's a slow, burning intensity to his writing that is finely observed. Picture is the key word; furnishing a fragment of information, he allows the listener to complete the portrait.

The 11 songs are peopled by real life characters, some famous and named, some awaiting their fifteen minutes. Louis Armstrong, David Rodriguez, at least two US presidents (JFK and Lincoln), John Wilkes Booth and Robert Johnson contribute to the former category.

The late Townes Van Zandt is captured with the line, "He fell from a fourth floor window and it didn't hurt 'im any." *Strong Enough For Two* was commissioned for the 1981 award-winning Tony Bruni documentary of the same name. It recounts the short life of Ephram who suffered from a degenerative muscle disorder. The muted, yet thunderous, roll of drums in the closing seconds is chilling.

And for one perfect and complete movie, savour every word of *Texas, Texas*. Taylor's love for his basic, down-to-earth life is palpable. Nearly three decades ago, heading for California from his native Georgia, his plan was merely to pass through Texas and check out the music scene. Thankfully, he settled there . . .

The opening sentence to this feature was going to be "Eric Taylor is an extraordinarily gifted human being and songwriter" but that's already a widely acknowledged fact. If you don't yet own an Eric Taylor album, consider what you're missing. ■

*Interviews conducted with Arthur Wood and Peter O'Brien.*