

Eric Taylor – The “Shameless Love” Interview

Part 1

Parts of this interview took place at Eric Taylor's home in Columbus, Texas on Tuesday 28th May 1996, and the remainder of the interview took place by telephone on Monday 17th January 2005. During the latter interview, Eric was at home in Weimar, Texas and I was in Birmingham, England. Many thanks to Mickie Merkens and Brian Wood for their help in setting up the 1996 interview, and to Susan Lindfors for setting up the 2005 interview.

Introduction : Eric Taylor was born in Atlanta, Georgia during 1949, his parents moved to the Greenville/Spartanburg area of South Carolina when he was six months old, and he returned to Georgia aged eleven. In his late teens Taylor headed to Washington D.C., with thoughts of studying at Georgetown University, but returned to Georgia a few months later. Joining some friends for a *road trip* to California, Eric ran out of money having made it as far west as Houston, Texas. Taylor was twenty years old when Texas became his home. During his teen years Eric had played in R&B bands in Georgia, plus he wrote songs - *“I had always written poetry and stories. In the early sixties everybody had a guitar. Writing music was just an extension of writing poetry. Music was the thing that drove my life and my friend's lives.”* In Houston he soon befriended local entrepreneur Mike Condray - *“He would always be very truthful with me. I trusted him.”* - and worked for him for a few years, in various capacities, at the Family Hand Restaurant and the music venue, Jubilee Hall. Having arrived in Texas without a guitar, within a few months, *flying solo*, Taylor was playing sets at the Family Hand, The Old Quarter and other local venues. In 1976 Eric contributed three songs to the locally released compilation **“Through The Night Darkly”** and the following year won the Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting competition. By this stage he was performing in clubs all over Texas, and was soon playing the college circuit in the S.E. states. I intended questioning Eric about the evolution of his songwriting style plus the making of his debut album, **“Shameless Love,”** but I began by asking him what had *made him settle* in Houston, instead on to some other destination.....

Eric Taylor : The Family Hand had music. Within the course of three or four days of finding the place I heard Lightning Hopkins, Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. That blew the back of my head off. First of all, I'd never been so mesmerised by anyone, as I was when I first saw Townes play and sing. He was striking, I think, in probably every area. Not just lyrically, but his presentation. He was fast and clean and dark. He was like a racehorse. Amazing to see. Of course, Guy could sit for hours and play songs one after another that were great. Lightning was actually part of the Houston community. I think anybody that writes ought to sit down there for a while and listen. Houston was a wide-open musical town, I think, long before Austin ever was. I know there's been this crazy, weird competition between Houston and Austin. Historically, Houston had the most diverse, incredible number of musicians, I think, probably of any place in the world at that time. Nobody broke into factions. There wasn't a folk scene where all the folk singers hung together. We might finish a gig at the Old Quarter in 1971 or '72 and all pile in somebody's truck or van and go to Irene's, which was an all-night shotgun shack, juke joint place out behind the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It was a woman's house that had become this place where you could go and listen to music. We might listen to Johnny Winter or Rocky Hill until four or five o'clock in the morning, because it was music. There were no boundaries. Jazz guitar players played what were called folk clubs. They were music clubs man. Just little bitty places. The Old Quarter was in downtown Houston in a wino area. It looked like you were in New York City. On any given night you could see a jazz player, you could see Townes, you could see Lightning, you could see Guy, you could see me, you could see Vince Bell. God, on and on. Frank Davis. Holly Blue. Steve Earle. George Ensle. There wasn't a folk scene – what are you talking about folk scene? You played guitar, you wrote music, you hung out, you got drunk, you shot dope. Whatever you wanted to do, you did it. It wasn't all tidy. It was a real diverse scene. A lot of us cut our teeth at The Old Quarter. When I played I would always do some of the new stuff that I'd written. I'd do songs by friends. Some Billy Joe Shaver stuff. Some Jesse Winchester stuff. I'd play things like Townes' “Nothin” or – Guy had a song that I used to do all the time called “Step Inside This House.” Outside of Houston and Texas those songs and those writers weren't really known.

FW : Blues music seems to have been a constant reference point in your life in South Carolina, Georgia and then in Texas. In terms of melody and rhythm, the music you write and play doesn't strictly have what I would term as a blues backbone.

ET : Not necessarily, no. I think there are some people that can hear them. The drop D tunings that I use, I learned from blues singers. The drop B string that I use on things like "Hey Little Ryder," I learned from old blues musicians who were slide players. They used it as a melody string, and dropped the B string down to A. They would play in a minor key, they would play in a major key, but use it as a slide string. Those things I learned from those guys. I didn't learn those from folk festival guitar workshops. I learned from being inquisitive "*What the hell is doing with that string?*" I'd ask them and they would show me. People like Manse Lipscomb and Mississippi Fred McDowell.

FW : Did the music that was around in Houston make you a more prolific writer.

ET : No. I was already writing. A lot of people my age, and also younger people were writing. We just kind of all fell in together. Like I said, seeing Guy and Townes and Lightning in a short span of time was a huge inspiration. The other major inspiration was all the other musicians that were out there at the time.

FW : Did living in that environment alter the style in which you wrote songs.

ET : Sure. I don't think you can hear anybody as strong as Townes Van Zandt and not be moved. People who grew up in Texas and listening to Townes and Guy, but especially Townes, had to work hard as writers. We'd finish a song, and sit back and ask the question, "*Does it sound too much like Townes?*" You can't listen to somebody as powerful as Townes Van Zandt when you were as young as we were and not be influenced by his music. You're going to write like that for a while. Wrote like that for a while, tried to write like Guy for a while – whether I knew I was doing it or not - I'm sure I was doing it. When I listen to some of my older songs, I'm sure I can hear Guy Clark's influence in them. I certainly can hear Townes influence in them. It's kind of like what John Lennon said about "Working Class Hero." When he wrote that, they said "*It sounds like a Bob Dylan song.*" He said "*Well, I think anybody that plays acoustic guitar in a minor key, it might sound like a Bob Dylan song.*"

FW : Did the music you were hearing in Houston make you become a critical editor of your work.

ET : Yeah, much more. Because you learn to recognise the influence in it. For a while there, Van Zandt song outlines were what people went by. You tried to see if you could write a line as good as that. Like anything else, I think wears off. You find other influences. You find other things. You hear other people. Finally you end up developing a style of your own.

FW : As an aside, back then, would you have described yourself as a voracious reader.

ET : Uhuh. It has always been a big deal. It has always been a big deal in my life. I was then and I am now. I can't even afford to get the bookcases built for the books that we've got stacked in trunks [Laughs].

FW : When I listen to your songs, I think of them as movies. Most movies tell a story. From the beginning was there a powerful motivation to tell a story in your songs.

ET : Always. Yeah. There was a definite transition from writing poetry or prose, or short stories, to moving into music, because I played guitar. It was a natural progression. I mean, I learned to play guitar – or learned to play around on the guitar. I think if you are already writing, you are naturally going to put words to whatever music you are playing. There were other kids doing it when I was growing up. There was a guy in my town called Sloan Hayes. His parents had a grand piano, and I would go over to Sloan's and we would sit at the piano. He would write melodies and I would write lyrics. I enjoyed it. It seemed to come to me [Eric snaps his fingers]. I could get things from hearing things. So that was what I kind of ended up doing.

FW : That said, you haven't co-written with many people. You're very much your own man.

ET : Pretty much 100% [Laughs]. It would be hard for me to leave a song alone, if I was writing with somebody else. I would go back and re-write it my way. Or I'd write another song. All the years that Nanci and I were together, I think we co-wrote one song called "Ghost In The Music," that is on her "**Poet In The Window**" album. That was our only collaboration. Lyle [Lovett] and I wrote a song together as a joke. Certainly I never thought it would ever be recorded. We made up "Fat Babies" on the way to Kerrville one year. I picked him up in College Station and we drove to Kerrville together. That song probably dates back to the early '80's.

FW : There's a great economy of words in the way you construct a lyric. Yet you succeed in painting the picture. Was that a difficult skill to acquire.

ET : I think it's a hard thing to learn to do. It always been the thing that I've strived to do. I've always thought that real writing is about the placement of words. It's not about the spilling of the story. It is like a painting. It is like a movie. Some of my favourite films are documentary films. I think one of the reasons that I like those so much, is because film is used so sparsely [Eric snaps his fingers]. It's real. You see it. It's happening. If you like, you are there, or maybe you are even eavesdropping – or you have been there, or you've stood there. You've done that. You've talked to those people yourself. I've always looked to try to see how few words I could use to paint a picture.

FW : If there is an economy of words, it's almost as if you're leaving a piece out for the listener to work out.

ET : Yeah. I'm much more interested in your interpretation of the song, than mine.

to be continued.

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 01/05
[2008 words]

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Eric Taylor – The “Shameless Love” Interview

Part 2

*In the first episode, Eric talked about how his skill as a songwriter evolved after settling in Houston, Texas. This week we begin focussing upon his debut album “**Shameless Love**.” Many thanks to Mickie Merkens and Susan Lindfors for, respectively, setting up the 1996 and 2005 interviews.*

Folkwax : By the late seventies you had a significant catalogue of self-composed songs, you'd won Kerrville New Folk, you'd played Kerrville mainstage, you were working on the college circuit. Was it in your mind that there was now a timescale in terms of cutting a solo album.

Eric Taylor : No. I didn't want to cut an album really.

FW : Because.

ET : I didn't think it was necessary [Laughs]. It wasn't real important to me. I really didn't care much for performing back in those days. I was one of those very uncomfortable, intellectual kind of assholes. I thought that performing was cheesy. What was important was writing. Playing songs was important. I think writing was probably the most important thing. That's what we did. We wrote tons of songs, stuff that we might play two or three times and then move on and go write another one [Laughs]. I was bright enough to know that I was learning to write, that I was still learning to write. I wasn't enamoured with having a record out. There were a lot of people who wanted that. I never got real exited about “*Oh, I'm going to make a record. I'm going to make a record,*” kind of thing. I wasn't a case of “*I've got to go do it.*” It just wasn't my deal. I wasn't very driven towards that at all. You must remember, the times were kind of different. I can't remember anybody, until probably in the late seventies, really sitting down from my little group of folks - people like me and Vince and George, sitting down and saying, “*We really need to try to get a record deal.*” We didn't talk about it. I don't remember ever yearning for a record deal.

FW : It was your booking agent who entered you for the 1977 Kerrville New Folk Contest. Was making an album a similar *fait accompli*, where you're eventually cajoled into making it by others.

ET : Absolutely. Sure. I saw some of the people who were investors in Featherbed Productions a month or two ago, when we did a show at Anderson Fair [Laughs], and I said, “*I told you not to do this. Throwing good American dollars down a rat hole. It's the music business.*” They didn't make a lot of money off that record. Nobody did.

FW : What's your recall of how Featherbed Productions and Tom Southwick, who was the person driving it, came together.

ET : A bunch of these people met up at my apartment, over on West Bell Street. They all had their notebooks and their ties and shit.

FW : So these were folks with regular jobs, who were fans of your music.

ET : Yeah. They said, *"We're going to make a record,"* and I said *"Good luck boys [Laughs]. What are you going to call your band?"* *"No,"* they said, *"We're going to make a record with – you."* I tried to talk them out of it. I said *"Look man, you're not going to make a single dime on it. You'll be lucky to get your money back."*

FW : From what you're saying, you didn't seem to be expressing too much confidence in the selling power of your material. Did you consider yourself to be a songwriter who was still learning.

ET : No, it was because I'd seen other people make records. I had witnessed what had happened to them. Plus, it didn't make a lot of sense to me. Like I said, I wasn't very driven towards doing it. They were nice people. I just thought I'd try to give them some advice [Laughs]. And the best advice to give anybody heading towards the music business is *"Don't do it."* [Laughs]. Keep your money in your wallet.

FW : Presumably it was the late seventies – probably 1978/79 when Featherbed, as a production company first reared it's head.

ET : Yeah.

FW : OK, here's a scenario. Later the same day, after meeting the investors, you're alone in your room, and you're looking over your catalogue of songs. Surely in your heart of hearts, you knew you had an album there. You probably had more than one album there.

ET : I had several albums there.

FW : So why are you fighting the inevitable. As a songwriter's catalogue develops, come hell or high water, that person is going to make a recording.

ET : Like I said, I just wasn't that keen on making a record. I thought it would be fun going in and doing it. Once I got up there, and started working on it, it was great.

FW : So eventually you settle your mind to the fact that you're going to make a record.

ET : Sure. Well, I'd settled my mind to making a good record. That was the main thing.

FW : Presumably there was a period where you searched for a suitable studio.

ET : One of the reasons I decided to make a record, was because I found the studio.

FW : How long were you looking for a studio.

ET : Oh, a couple of years probably, on and off. I didn't want to cut anything in Austin. I wasn't that impressed with things that were coming out of Houston studios at the time, either. I wanted some place where I could use a decent producer, but could still call my own shots. When I found John and Laurie [Hill], at that time, they seemed to fit exactly what I was looking for. I came back to Houston, called Tom Southwick and said *"I finally found the studio, if you want to go look at it."* He was excited. Tom went up to Fredericksburg and spent a day or two up there, met John and Laurie and saw the whole deal. He said, *"Well, do you want to do it?"* I said *"Yeah,"* so he got the money together.

FW : How precisely did you meet John and Laurie.

ET : I was working on a documentary film. We had been to Kerrville, and out to the Quiet Valley Ranch. This was during the off-season. The ranch was empty. We had been out there filming, with me talking about the Kerrville festival. The guy that was shooting the film, was friends with John and Laurie. We ended up going to Fredericksburg to Loma Ranch [*] and spending the night. When we got there, there was no one around. I got up the next morning and went downstairs and was looking for coffee, and that's when I ran into Laurie Hill. I scared the hell out of her. I was a total stranger in her kitchen, and I didn't look too good either. When I first wake up in the morning, I stumble around looking for coffee – she runs and gets John [Laughs] and that's how we met. I ended up spending the day there, talking to them, and being shown the studio. Listening to a bunch of tapes that they had been working on with different people. I really liked the place. I felt really at home there. So that's the history.

FW : When you were recording the album, I presume you lived in the bunkhouse accommodation at Loma Ranch.

ET : Yeah.

FW : Do you recall how long the album sessions lasted. Was the album done in one session, or did you make a few visits there.

ET : Oh, it took several visits. I'd usually go up in the middle of the week, or early in the week, and work through the weekend. The musicians would then come in. I remember being in the studio, the day after John Lennon was killed [£]. It felt strange to be in there laying down vocal tracks.

FW : Was that early in the recording process.

ET : No, that was partway through it. Heading towards where Nanci [Griffith] was putting on vocal tracks. It was the day after, and some of that was difficult. On and off, the sessions lasted – I really don't know man. Someone who could tell you that, exactly, would be Southwick. The sessions probably took place over a period of a couple of months.

FW : How did you cut the tracks.

ET : I would usually cut my vocal live while playing guitar. That's the way I like to do it.

FW : Were you there when the sessions musicians added their parts.

ET : Oh yeah. Absolutely. Every note on that record, I was there.

FW : I'd like to talk about the session players. Top of my list, I have John Grimaudo.

ET : John and I lived together in Houston a long time. He was like my best friend then, I guess. He showed up at my place on Feagan Street – I think I met John in 1976. I had seen him playing somewhere, and he was sleeping in his van. It was summertime, and skeeters were getting him, so I said *"Hey man if you ever need a place to crash, you can always come by my place. If you don't want to sleep in the van."* He showed up one night. I don't know – a week later. He said, *"Hey man, these mosquito's are killing me, you said I could crash once in a while if I wanted to."* I said, *"Come on in, man."* I lived in a little efficiency apartment. I put a cot down and he stayed for quite a while [Laughs]. That's where the song "Shermann Karmann" came from. John is "Shermann Karmann." He went to Louisiana and Mississippi to play some gigs. "Shermann Karmann" is the story of his return [Laughs] to Fagan Street.

FW : Was Steve Beasley a Houston guitar player.

ET : I knew Steve because he had been playing with Vince [Bell] in Level Flight. He was a good guitar player. I asked him if he'd like to come up and do some stuff. Peter Gorisch was going to be playing bass for me, but he fell ill and then got tied up in another deal and couldn't make the sessions. We had to scramble for a bass player, and John and Laurie just happened to be on the phone to this guy named Gurf and John said *"Hey man you can play bass, can't you?"* Of course Gurf Morlix was a guitar player, but turned out to be a really good bass player. I don't think anybody knew that, even him [Laughs]. He came in. I listened to some of his stuff, loved it, and he stayed and finished the sessions.

FW : I'm intentionally pairing percussionist James Gilmer and cellist John Hagen. They have been around for a long time. How did you meet them.

ET : I knew John when he was still this young guy with the Austin Symphony. Nanci, I think, was looking for a cello player. I told her, and Mike Williams [#] about him, I think. We got him out to play with Nanci on the B.F. Deal record [%]. Gilmer had been playing with me for years. Nobody was using conga players back then. I was. I would get Hagen to play with me at times. Back then, I'd probably known James for the longest time, and John for maybe a couple of years.

FW : I guess the keyboard player, Riley Osbourn, was somebody that was imported by John and Laurie.

ET : Yeah. I knew him because he was married to Laurie's sister. He had played with Shake [Russell] some, I think. I'd seen him around, but we weren't close.

FW : Then we have all your female backing vocalists. Were the Cain Sisters a Houston outfit.

ET : No, they were based in Austin. I met them through Nanci who was an Austin person. The crazy Cain Sisters.

FW : How about Susan Fowler.

ET : Those are Krum, Texas people. That's Bubba and Susan, or Aileen and Elkin Thomas. Susan Fowler is Aileen Thomas. They were my song publishers at the time. She's a really good singer and had sung at one time with Bob Dylan. They were coming through and I had her double her voice with Nanci's on "Game Of Hearts." She nailed it with one take.

FW : The person whose voice you hear most on the album apart from yourself is Nanci Griffith. I guess I would be correct in saying that by the time the album was being cut, you had split up.

ET : Yup.

FW : That being the case, why did she have such a prominent role on the album.

ET : She wanted to do it, and I wanted her to do some of it too. I was still struggling with a lot of that man. It was a very difficult time. Very difficult time. I was really strung out during the making of that record.

FW : Was it case that even though you were no longer together, she was a person you could rely on.

ET : It wasn't about relying on her. I just knew she could do it.

to be continued.

Note.

[*] – Loma is a Spanish word that translates as Hill.

[£] – John Lennon was shot dead outside the Dakota Building in New York, on the night of 8th December 1980.

[#] – Nashville based these days, Mike Williams, then an Austin based musician, was the owner/proprietor of B. F. Deal Records.

[%] – Eric was referring to Nanci's 1978 album "**There's A Light Beyond These Woods.**"

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 01/05

[2320 words]

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Eric Taylor – The "Shameless Love" Interview

Part 3

*In the second episode, Eric talked about the making the “**Shameless Love**” album and we continue with that subject in this, the final episode. Many thanks to Mickie Merkens and Susan Lindfors for, respectively, setting up the 1996 and 2005 interviews.*

Folkwax : One of the times that I visited Loma Ranch, I recall seeing reels of tape with your name on them. I know there was more than ten songs cut during the “**Shameless Love**” sessions, why didn’t appear on the album.

Eric Taylor : We ran out of time man. You can only put so much material on vinyl records. “**Shameless Love**” is a long ten-song record in terms of minutes. When we were mixing it, and arranging the running order of the songs - toward the end of a vinyl record you start losing sound quality. It just drops off the end of the world, so we had to pay attention to that. The ten songs we had on there are fairly long pieces for that time, anyway. I picked what I wanted on it, and that was the angle for putting the record together.

FW : Can I run something past you. Do you have a song titled “Ghost Of The Romance.”

ET : Yeah. That was going to be the title song of the album. We tried that song in the studio for days and just couldn’t get a cut that I liked, or that anybody else liked. So we didn’t use it. I ended up playing “Shameless Love” one night, just by myself. The guitar is a little bit out of tune, but I liked the way it came out and I decided to keep it, and put it on the album. Thinking back, there was another song that was cut called, “Pushin’ Your Luck.” It was a very angry song.

FW : What do you recall about working at Loma Ranch Studio with John and Laurie. Is there any comment you want to offer about them.

ET : That they were brilliant. The best ears in the business, you know, at that time. In my opinion, absolutely the best ears. Brilliant people. What they achieved, was groundbreaking from the standpoint of working with an eight-track recorder. I mean, absolutely. We won some kind of award for that record. An audiophile magazine - something like that - reviewed the record as being the most transparent record of the year. They didn’t pay any attention to the songs or the lyrics, just focused on the recording itself.

FW : The sound quality and the clarity.

ET : You asked about the time we spent working on it. I can tell you we spent as much time, I believe, or more time even mixing the record, as we did on actual recording sessions. We were very exact about what we wanted. You have to realise that this is all pre-digital equipment. Every track, not just every song, but every track of every song on that record was individually sound reduced. Noise reduced. DBX in code, DBX decode. That’s why you can hear the acoustic guitar throughout the recording. It never falls out. You never lose it, at any point. We probably spent more money than we should on the mix, but it was really important. The cool part about John and Laurie was that it was just as important to them as it was to me. Maybe more so even. That’s what made them so good at the time. It was just perfect. Then there was Juan Crouch – it had to pass the Crouch test.

FW : Who was that.

ET : Juan Crouch, Hondo Crouch’s son [^]. One reason you could fall in love with a studio like Lomas was that I first saw Crouch when he was flying overhead in an airplane, basically held together with bailing wire and chewing gum. He landed in the front field out there, in front of Loma’s house [Laughs]. He had these big old speakers out at this place where Hondo had lived - they called it the Rock House. There was like an amphitheatre out there. Jerry Jeff [Walker] has speakers out there. Each one was big as a refrigerator. Crouch had these hooked up to a stereo system and we would go out to this amphitheatre and listen to the record. We also set those huge speakers up outside Lomas. Juan carted them over on his flatbed truck [Laughs]. We set them up, and then we’d get in Juan’s pick-up truck and go up to the top of the hill and turn the record on. See what it sounded like from half a mile away [Laughs]. That’s how we would check stuff. If it raised the hair on your arm, then we kept it. Those were the Crouch tests, and I passed them. He would have told me if I didn’t.

FW : Did you pass them with flying colours [Laughs].

ET : I did buddy [Laughs]. Flying colours.

FW : In the terms of the recording sessions, is there anything in particular that you recall. For instance, any comment about the recording studio.

ET : The studio was perfect [Laughs]. Everything was lined up like a baseball field man. I have a lot of memories from that time. Incredible memories.

FW : How about amusing situations.

ET : Sure we had those. There was some incredibly humorous shit. I remember waking up Gurf Morlix at four o'clock in the morning and sitting beside his bed and asking "*What does Gurf mean?*" We had fun. We laughed. There was a lot of that. There was a big stone gargoyle on a rock pile – a kind of art piece - outside the door of John and Laurie's house. Someone was videotaping, and Carla Cain picked up this gargoyle and put it in front of her face and said, "*I got stoned last night.*" Then she drops the stone and says "*And I lost face.*" That kind of became a theme for a couple of days.

FW : The CD reissue version of "**Shameless Love**" features two extra tracks. The liner booklet doesn't confirm their vintage, but I guess they weren't recorded at Loma Ranch.

ET : Yeah, they were.

FW : But not during the "**Shameless Love**" sessions.

ET : That's correct. I guess probably they were cut within a year or less, after the record came out. They were written during the time that I was working on "**Shameless Love**" – that era – I simply went up there to lay down some songs. There was no intention that they would be part of a second album.

FW : Sound wise, the tracks appear to feature your voice and acoustic guitar.

ET : That's all there is. It's a live recording of my voice and my guitar. I spent a lot of time at John and Laurie's after the record came out. I think there is something like seven or eight songs on a two-track tape that was cut in late 1981. It's called "**The Radio Tape.**" That's what John wrote on it.

FW : From what you've said "**Shameless Love**" came out in early 1981.

ET : I think it came out in very early 1981.

FW : In 1983 you decide to retire.

ET : [Laughs] Yeah, I retired. I needed a break. I needed to save myself, you know.

FW : Can we talk some about the extra cuts on the "**Shameless Love**" CD. "Dollar Bill Hines" relates the stories of members of a family. Is it based on real life.

ET : Sure. I was living in a rescue mission when I first arrived in Houston. It was a place you could go to get something to eat. There was a guy there named Bill Hines. His real name was Will Hines, but that's hard to get into a rhyme. Dollar Bill is what they called him anyway. That's the name he went by, but all of his *sign-ins* were William. He also appears in another song you know - there are two songs that went together, and the other is on the "**Eric Taylor**" record.

FW : [In my office, Eric's recorded output is filed on shelves within reach of my right hand]. Maybe that explains why the name seems familiar. Looking at the album track list, I'd guess "Mission Door."

ET : Yeah. He appears in "Mission Door." That song also comes from my early experiences in Houston.

FW : Tell us about "Half Moon Hotel."

ET : It was a song I wrote about Nanci.

FW : Is "East Texas Moon" one of your earlier Houston songs.

ET : Yeah. That's one of the earlier ones.

FW : You said earlier that there were times during the seventies when you felt you were still learning your trade as a writer. Lyrically, I can hear shades of [Steven] Fromholz in "East Texas Moon," and not only that, your voice even sounds like him on the cut.

ET : Wow. Cool. That's really cool.

FW : In the opening lines you mention Vince, who I'd guess is fellow songwriter Vince Bell, but those lines also include "*Old friend Pete's in Tennessee.*" I'm struggling to put a surname to Pete.

ET : That's Pete Gorisch, the guy that was going to play bass on my record. Pete played cello for Nanci, on and off, for years. He also played bass with lot of people, and was in a band called Rat Creek. Pete was a really good guitar player. His father owned a violin store here, and was a concert violinist, but eventually went blind. Pete was one of the guys who went with JMI and Cowboy Jack Clement in Nashville.

FW : "East Texas Moon" appears to a biographical song.

ET : Yeah. It's a song about living up in Palestine, Texas.

FW : You told me in 1996 that the song "Featherbed" predated the creation of Featherbed Productions. Presumably the name Featherbed Productions wasn't your suggestion.

ET : I don't think I suggested it. I think I always was able to use it as a name. They gave me that. I think Southwick probably came up with the name, but I'm not sure.

FW : To me that's a song about living on the streets.

ET : Well, it's a song about really missing the city. I wrote it when I was living way up in the country and I was going mad, living out there. I missed the city, really, really bad. I wanted the big buildings, the tall skyscrapers and the streets. I wanted to get back to life.

FW : Was this because you'd never been used to wide open spaces before.

ET : I simply missed the chaos. I wrote that when I was living in Palestine, teaching school. I would go to Houston on weekends and have a wild time, then go back up to Palestine and teach school in this very redneck town.

FW : This is something new to me. When and what did you teach in school.

ET : This would have been in 1975. I was in the Artists in Schools Project, run by Texas Arts & Humanities. I was teaching creative writing. Nathan, my son, was just born so it was perfect.

FW : Presumably when you were in the city, as a musician you frequented bars. Is that where the song "Cowgirl's Heel" came from.

ET : "Cowgirl's Heel" is about Lyse Moore. You know her don't you? Lyse is a real cowgirl who grew up in Texas. She and Richard Dobson were together for years and years.

FW : Oh, the girl with the bad tempered parrot.

ET : The girl with the monkey. She has parrots as well. "Cowgirl's Heel" is not necessarily about her. It's a story. She's certainly the driving part of it. I used to watch her ride horses, and observe how quick her feet were in telling the horse what to do. So we get the line, "*She's as quick as a cowgirl's heel.*" She's one of my oldest friends, and still is.

FW : Tell us about writing "Joseph Cross."

ET : “Joseph Cross” is the only song that I ever sat down and wrote, beginning to end. I wrote the first line, second line, all the way through. It just poured out of me. I wrote it at John Grimaudo’s table in Rockport, Texas in the middle of one afternoon. I had been thinking about that story, and had even thought about attempting a play. A play about the West. I made a lot of notes, and had this song in my head and didn’t know it. The story is a piece of fiction.

FW : As I understand it, “Charlie Ray McWhite” is about a relative.

ET : It’s a composite. Basically it’s a song about me killing my father off in the song. My father was still alive when that song was written. My father’s name was Charlie. My father’s best friend was a guy whose last name was McWhite. I had an uncle named Ray, and I put the three things together. Some of the things in the song are true, like the description of the trailer is pretty much true. The difference was, that he was there and I did see him. Little known facts I suppose you’d say.

FW : In the closing, album title track [on the original vinyl release] there’s a line *“It’s shameless love that killed the clown.”* The front cover picture on the CD is the same as the vinyl album, and there’s a clown marionette hanging from the chimney-breast. What’s the deal there.

ET : Yeah, there’s a doll. I have it right here in the music room. The same piece.

FW : Presumably the presence of the marionette was a cross reference to the song lyric.

ET : Yeah, basically. I collected clowns there for a while. I have a lot of books about clowns. I have self-portraits of me, as a clown [Laughs]. I was really into clowns and have a lot of books about them.

FW : I guess “Shameless Love” was written around the same time as “Only Lovers,” therefore the source of inspiration was the split with Nanci.

ET : Right. Yeah. I don’t think my heart was broke, but it was horribly twisted. There was definitely some damage to it. It was a pretty rough time to be making a record, but I think it turned out to be one of the best records of that time. I think it’s a really good record. It’s amazing to me how many people contact me and say *“Man, that’s in my Top 10 records of all time.”* It’s amazing to me that people still like it that way.

Note.

[^] – If you’re unfamiliar with the exploits of Texas legend, Hondo Crouch, I’d refer you to <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/CC/fcr52.html>

Arthur Wood.
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