



Eric Taylor “**The Great Divide**” Blue Ruby Music

Here’s the latest trip, one lasting seconds short of fifty minutes, through the imaginative psyche of Eric Taylor. For openers, the rear of the CD liner booklet features the *totally Taylor* catch-all sub-title “**Lyrics, Lies, Softshoe, Fried Pies.**” In terms of sonic presentation, less is more as far as this second release on Taylor’s Blue Ruby label is concerned. Mostly it’s just Eric’s voice and his acoustic, electric or resonator guitar – well, per track, pairings of those tools of his trade actually. Percussionist James Gilmer contributes to four cuts, album engineer Rock Romano’s bass is heard on the Arthur Jackson penned cover tune “Ain’t But One Thing Give A Man The Blues” while Eric Demmer blows alto and tenor sax on a three song segue of covers that I’ll look at in more detail later. As for other voices that are raised in song, Susan Lindfors appears on four tracks, and Jelle Douma, Eric’s Dutch buddy on just the one.

“**The Great Divide**” opens with the album title cut, and I can already envision Eric onstage performing this number, head tilted to the side, while enjoying a sly grin as he picks out the opening chords. The reason why? – across four verses, as each closes, the Jack The Lad narrator with “*a crooked smile*” reveals “*I got another woman....*” and each possesses a trait that keeps him, alternatively, on his toes or a truly satisfied man....with a crooked smile. The narrator in the conversational “Big Love” tells us in the opening line of the second verse that his name is James Willis Hardin, his mother owns a flower store and that he weighs 459. If we’re talking pounds weight, that’s one hell of a lot of man, but the picture that you think you see at the outset changes radically by the time the lyric has run its course. Jim Willie dials a telephone number he finds on a book of matches and talks about himself to the person at the end of the line. Towards the close of the track Jim Willie delivers two curious insights – he’s bleeding – a little or profusely? and someone is hammering on the door of the store – who? By the close of this vignette no answers are provided to the latter nor the identity of the person he’s called – a doctor? a sex line? - thus allowing the listener the freedom to supply the missing parts to this particular picture. Taylor’s eye for small details is what truly makes his writing special. Partway through this song Hardin comments “*I used to have a parakeet*” but adds that his mother’s cat polished it off, while the line “*I’ll take her gun and shoot that thing*” indicates intended “eye for an eye” revenge. “Big Love” features one of those Eric Taylor melodies the pace of which at times hesitates, as if not knowing where to go next. That said, it’s an addictive “*must hear again*” tune. Three of the five verses to “Whorehouse Mirrors & Pawnshop Knives” pan in scenes that occur, respectively, in Hampton, Georgia plus Austin and Corpus Christi, Texas.

A performance of “Mickey Finn” has regularly featured in Eric’s live shows, here in the UK, in recent years. My recall is that he would preface the tune with the insight that it was part of his, music and spoken narrative, Texas Song Theatre production, and then add that reference the characters that appear in the lyric, the late Townes Van Zandt plays the part of Mickey Finn while Odetta is the Queen of Diamonds. For a mere moment, let’s quickly look at the world of bar keeping. A mickey finn is a drink composed of alcohol and chloral hydrate, concocted by bar keepers in the early twentieth century to incapacitate hardened drinkers [+]. A road story, the action in “Mickey Finn” takes place in the dry town of Memphis, Tennessee and in a “wet county” just across the Mississippi River in Arkansas. A certain four-letter expletive, delivered by the Queen Of Diamonds, eliminates the possibility of this cut gaining radio play and that’s a crying shame since it’s a masterpiece well worth the hearing. The first cover song on this collection, “Ain’t But One Thing Give A Man The Blues” was penned by South Carolina bred bluesman Arthur Jackson [1911 – 1977] aka Peg Leg Sam. As for the precise nature of “the one thing” I guess the line “*What makes the rooster call the morning before day*” and the repeated reference to women in the lyric are pointers.

I guess it was unintentional on Eric's part that "Just Short Of The Line" should bear such an appropriate title – at a tad short of two minutes thirty, it's the briefest cut on **"The Great Divide."** Reference the lyrical thrust, this life produces winners and losers in the game of love, the secret being to always remain in the game whatever the result. While touring with Nanci Griffith, sat on the tour bus in New York City, Eric spotted a man with a mandolin harassing a woman at a bus depot. "Manhattan Mandolin Blues" narrated by the edgy low-life musician is the result, and Lindfors "in your face" supporting vocal adds substance to the inherent lyrical tension. Eric's "Storms" – lyrically, a "marriage" of real and poetic squalls of varying intensity - first appeared on Griffith's September 1989 release of the same name, and is the only already well familiar card in this pack. Having finally got around to cutting the tune, Taylor's version comes c/w angelic sounding backing vocals from Lindfors and Douma. The narrator in "Shoes" is, sadly, deceased and about to be buried. We really don't discover if he was a good or a bad guy, he certainly could spin a tale! Pursuing that vein he goes on to recall that years ago he was married in the shoes he is now wearing, while he lied to friends about the source of his suit - it wasn't made by a Paris tailor, but rather came straight "off the peg." At the close with some certainty he expressed the conviction that once he's, so to speak, "in the ground" he'll meet the devil. By way of confirming that forthcoming event as well as his spiritual premonition, each of the five verses opens with the line *"Something's goin' to happen today."* The four verse "Brand New Companion" first appeared on Van Zandt's 1971 recording **"Delta Momma Blues."** Having delivered verses one through three of van Zandt's song, Eric then switches for a couple of verses to transcribed segments of the "Lulu's Back In Town" lyric [#] that he has merged with lines from "Dirty Dirty," the latter composed by current day Houston based song scribe Mike Sumler. The track closes with Van Zandt's fourth verse, but the overall effect is a bluesy sounding concoction, enhanced by Demmer's sax, where the seemingly diversely sourced pieces of this musical puzzle actually fit, with the mid-section of the track portraying a person with attitude while also hinting at child abuse.

In the last decade, since he recommenced his recording career, this is not the first time I've stated that Taylor's song lyrics unfold like a movie. The closing cut, "Bonnie & Avery," which flashes seamlessly between current and past times, is a thoroughly agreeable example. In essence it's a comment on how love can, amazingly, survive for decades. Having revealed that, once upon a time, Avery used to play in a coronet dance band, with a mere three words Taylor flawlessly portrays that ensemble – *"Silver and gold."* Though both are now mature in years, Bonnie Wilder still retains some of her once stunning looks - once upon a time she was a taxi dancer. And if there's a melancholic moment here, for Avery, it's the obtuse revelation that *"Panama left 'em childless."* Still besotted with each other, these days Bonnie and Avery own a bar.

Eric produced and arranged the eleven tracks on **"The Great Divide"** and there are a few tracks here where he, figuratively, skies the ball out of park. Savouring the union of word and melody simply doesn't get any better than this. That you yearn to hear them again and again, merely confirms that it's another Eric Taylor classic.

Note.

[+] – History relates that originally a barman's intention for incapacitating a drinker would, in some cases, be to rob him. I recall that during my younger days, in Scottish bars, there used to be a three-part concoction known as a Cobalt Bomb – you can guess the potency and effect.

[#] – This song was penned back in 1935 for the show "Broadway Gondolier" by Al Dubin and Harry Warren.

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 09/05.