

Eric Taylor: a funny yet sensitive musician

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"In the end, life is a private act," a biographical sketch starts out on the liner of a Townes Van Zandt album. "We do not know what it feels like when another man thinks his thoughts. Exactly how it seems to him as he trembles in the sweetness of his visions or the corruption of his nightmares, no one will ever know. Thus, at a certain point, explanation stops. We see what we see, hear what we hear, read what we read, and are puzzled about the rest."

Eric Taylor is an enigmatic performer. He has been recognized in folk circles for several years as one of the region's premiere singer-songwriters, yet he seems content to remain a local, staying out of the hectic market-yourself-and-make-it-big music business into which so many hopefuls find themselves trapped. Except for special concert situations, he prefers to stay in Houston and play his favorite acoustic music bars.

In concert, Taylor has opened shows for Leo Kottke, David Bromberg, and Jerry Jeff Walker, and has shared billings with Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt. Other credits include his playing the Kerrville Folk Festival—an annual event in which only a select group of the nation's folk musicians are invited to participate—the past two years. He performed first as a New Folk songwriting contest winner and then as a headline act.

The restaurant was noisy and Taylor suggested going to his place for coffee. On the way he pointed out a neon sign that read, "Kennel-Town Pet Shop."

"At night it says *Kennel-Town hop*," he laughed.

At his place he pointed out an old Volkswagen bus with shot-out windows, courtesy of an avid fan.

Inside, he put some water on to boil and walked around the living room, giving the grand tour.

"These are my clowns," he said, picking up the largest of the bunch and introducing it as Emmett, after Emmett Kelly. "And this is my James Dean picture. And this is my son," he said, pointing to another picture.

Taylor said he moved to Houston in 1971. He was 20 and came from McDonough, Ga., population about 4000, "before the freeway."

"I left around the time the freeway was being built," he said. "I couldn't handle it. Too many Dobb's Houses and Stuckey's."

"I started doin' this mostly after I came to Houston—met some really fine people. I met Townes (Van Zandt) and Guy (Clark). I was playin' guitar and I was fascinated with Houston mainly because there were so many writers here. I mean really damn good writers."

In 1975, Taylor moved to Palestine, Texas and worked for Palestine schools as a creative writing instructor under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. He moved back to Houston when the school-year ended.

"I've always tried to look at myself more as a writer than anything else," he said. "If I can play good clean guitar and nice melodies, then fine."

Taylor writes nearly all of the material he does. His songs can be funny yet poignant. They are sobering, but not depressing. He deals in specifics, letting realistic situations make his point.

*He was three days out of Mobile,
Three days without a bath,
There's a knock at your door
Throw your things on the floor
Tell me 'bout the times you had.
Said it wasn't bad.*

"Writing a song, you don't have 500 pages to tell your story. Every word, every line has to be there. It has to say as much as a chapter in a book would. I like songs that have a beginning and an end. Not that that's the good musical way to write things. It sure as hell ain't commercial. I'd probably be beatin' my head against the musical wall if I thought it was. But I'm not that interested in any entertainer of the year awards.

"I don't buy that musician bullshit," he said. "I don't buy that scene very well at all. I think it's a degrading industry and full of people who aren't very bright. I can't see myself ever Hank Snowin' it. I can't see myself at 60-years-old goin' out with my guitar and singing my songs for people. I'd like to be a good writer. Mostly entertaining people is just a road to get my words out. I'm not very patient with musician egos.

"You run into a lot of problems with egos with people who are gettin' started. I guess I've been gettin' started for five years. But I've seen people who are playin' for 50 bucks a night who have egos as big as the world. But if you're playin' for 50 or 75 bucks a night, you ain't no star.

"I'm not real proud of the music business. I'm not real proud of a lot of the people I've met. I'm not real proud of the way they've handled themselves, includin' me. The things you have to go through, the things you have to think about yourself in order to write a tune, in order to get up in front of people to play it, it starts gettin' weird. Everybody's probably tried to stand like Dylan at least once, and they just end up gettin' a cramp in their leg.

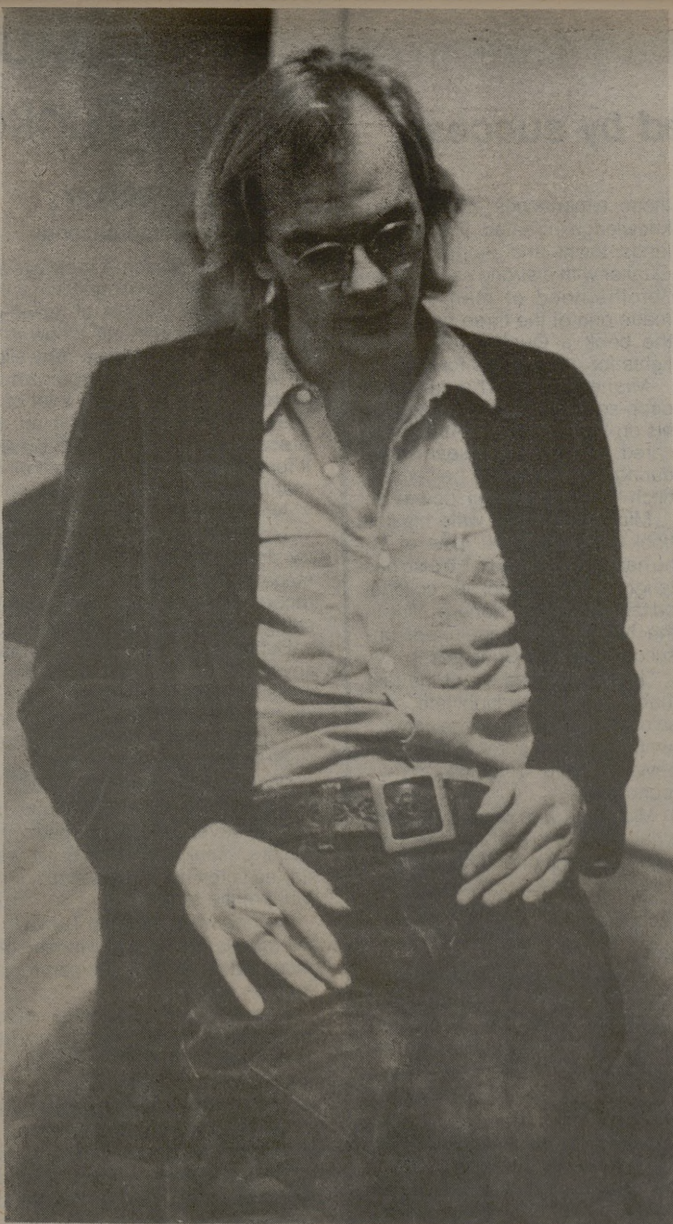
"At this point we should tap—dance or somethin'," Taylor said.

When he walks on stage with his guitar, Taylor presents himself. There is no act. He plays the way he feels, whether up, angry, depressed or drunk.

"You do feel a little cursed sometimes because you see things in your own head that other people may pass over—that don't upset people. I find that most writers don't have any real vent. I think that's a whole lot of the reason behind their self-destructiveness, a lot of violence in their lives. I don't mean just physical violence. Things hit me and they don't seem to bounce off. They seem to stick and I can't shake them very well. Painful experience, I carry it and sometimes the depression, it actually becomes a real physical thing. You get so down that you hurt, you physically hurt. Then there are other times when it's great. You're in a business that the ups are up. The ups are way up and the downs are low down. It's sort of an emotional culdesac.

*Maybe I'm the kind of gambler,
Who burns his hands on a brand
new moon,
And his luck runs pale in the after-
noon,
And he suffers the cold as the old
folks do.*

*Any gamblin man will know,
That's ever played for love or gold,
That the game don't end,
You pick up what you win.*



TAYLOR SHOWS A HINT of the depressive mood, left, which he says inspires him to write many of his songs.

Photo by
Lyle Lovett

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