

The 'Early' days of Eric Taylor



Three years after his death, the storied Houston songwriter can be heard again on live recordings from the '70s

By **Andrew Dansby** STAFF WRITER

Susan Lindfors Taylor scattered her husband's ashes at a specific site meaningful to him within Palo Duro Canyon State Park. She kept other well-worn touchstones closer to their home in Bastrop. Eric Taylor's stainless-steel National finger picks have lost their luster from repeatedly striking steel strings to create a guitar tone all his own. The pages of his lyric notebooks are tea-stain brown, with spiral spines that twist like the branches of a live oak. The wear and tear contrasts with the black imprinted on the pages — "H's" inked with elegant curves and "S's" with a switchblade sharpness. These items were the



tools for Taylor, one of the greatest songwriters to have called Houston home.

The ongoing process of grieving also involves sharing something of Taylor's with the world. "Early Eric Taylor" captures performances by the singer-songwriter in Houston in 1975 and 1978. It's revelatory documentation of an artist whose body of work is considered a gold standard by other masters in his field. Guy Clark, who died in 2016, four years before Taylor, told the Chronicle that his student was "exacting with words in the way any master tradesman is with what he does." Nanci Griffith, who died

Taylor continues on G8

Top: Singer-songwriter Eric Taylor. Above: Susan Lindfors Taylor and Rock Romano listen to some of Eric Taylor's early work.

Top: Courtesy photo Above: Brett Coomer/Staff photographer

TAYLOR

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a year after Taylor, once called him “the William Faulkner of songwriting in our current time.”

Taylor’s songs were perfect constructions; he wouldn’t send them into the world otherwise. But they were also somewhat scarce, particularly when his discography is overlapped with those of his mentors, peers and followers. He left behind only a clutch of recordings to his name, and a few of those titles are out of print.

“Early Eric Taylor” offers something new for those drawn to his music: his voice and guitar with minimal ornamentation.

“With his guitar work, the arrangements were so complete,” says Lyle Lovett, a longtime friend and admirer of Taylor’s work. “He was an example to me of how a solo performance could completely express what a song had to express. Eric solo is Eric at his finest. Eric solo is Eric at his most direct, in terms of communicating songs.”

After Taylor died in March 2020, percussionist James Gilmer — a friend and Taylor collaborator known for his long tenure in Lovett’s Large Band — dove into some recordings he’d made in the 1970s, when he placed a reel-to-reel recorder and a Tapco mixer on a table near Taylor’s feet.

“It was sort of my way of dealing with Eric’s death,” he says.

He reached out to Lindfors Taylor, as well as Taylor’s children from previous marriages.

“I knew some of these were songs they’d never heard,” he says. “Or if they had heard them, they sure didn’t have a recording of them or anything they could hold in their hand. I thought they’d like to hear them.”

The artist as a young man

Gilmer and Lindfors Taylor worked with engineer Rock Romano for more than a year on “Early Eric Taylor.” They winnowed more than 60 songs down to 19 — 10 of which had never been published and released on a Taylor recording. Several songs — “Game of Hearts,” “East Texas Moon,” “Charlie Ray McWhite” among them — appeared on “Shameless Love,” his 1981 debut album. Many make their first published appearance on this release. Though Lovett points out that even those songs Taylor never recorded for release were familiar to those who had seen him perform around Houston.

The process was labored but offers a portrait of the artist as a young man. Taylor at the time of the recordings had established himself as an integral part of a brilliant songwriter scene in Houston, a city he never meant to call home. The Georgia native was on his way to California from North Carolina in the early 1970s when he ran out of money. He took a dishwashing job at the Family Hand, where he heard Lightnin’ Hopkins and Townes Van Zandt. His journey, at least for a while, had ended.

Taylor credited his environment for his music. He told the Chronicle, “Houston had four or five different focal points where musicians took the craft of writing extremely seriously.

“You’d talk with each other and work with each other. When we got together it was all about music.”

He didn’t refute the suggestion that he became an intimidating presence on that scene. Club owner and musician Rex Bell recounted having his nose broken by Taylor. A drinking habit explained at least part of the lag between his first and



Susan Lindfors Taylor, from left, Rock Romano and James Gilmer discuss the late Eric Taylor and his music.

Photos by Brett Coomer/Staff photographer



Eric Taylor is shown in an undated photo that is featured in the CD cover of “Early Eric Taylor.”

Photo courtesy Susan Lindfors Taylor

second albums, which he released in 1981 and 1995.

“The people at Anderson Fair saw me at my worst and at my best,” Taylor said. “It was just the times. People really went around showing the worst of themselves and the best of themselves. Nobody seemed to give a (expletive) one way or another who saw it. ‘This is me.’ And there was a lot of me.”

“Early Eric Taylor” offers more of him. Lindfors Taylor, Gilmer and Romano include a few introductions for songs dappled with a sense of humor that felt more scarce on his studio recordings. One tune on the set turns into a singalong.

“I think it just captures some of the greatest moments of Eric at his most brilliant and at his wittiest,” Romano says. “He was always a funny guy. He always had a sideways take on everything.”

Adds Lindfors Taylor, “He’d

get irritated with interviews because they’d ask, ‘Why so dark?’ And he’d say, ‘Are you reading the same papers I am?’ But at the same time, there was so much humor, too.”

Listening back

“It was hard for me to listen to initially,” Lindfors Taylor says of Gilmer’s tapes. “But after a while, I liked to hear them. And I became so grateful that we were still able to hear them. That they exist.”

“Early Eric Taylor” feels like it fills a void of sorts. Taylor’s discography is a bit of a mess: In addition to the 14-year lag between his first two albums, he jumped from record label to record label, cutting his songs when and where he could find the money to do so. His voice on “Early Eric Taylor” rests closer to the one heard on “Shameless Love,” before it settled into a distinctive growl.



“Early Eric Taylor” features a compilation of some of the singer’s live performances from early in his career.



Lindfors Taylor displays one of Taylor’s songbooks.

Romano jokes about the times he worked with Taylor in a recording studio. “I’d build this skyscraper of mics to get the sound right. Turns out I should’ve just done what James did. Put one mic right in front of him.”

Gilmer’s approach included the capture of some surface noise. If the percussion in Townes Van Zandt’s storied “Live at the Old Quarter” album was provided by empty bottles clanking in a trash can, with “Early Eric Taylor,” the added percussionist is the cash register operated by Joy Lewallen, an Anderson Fair volunteer for more than half a century.

“At times it sounds like a living room,” Lindfors Taylor says. “Except for the cash register.”

All three marvel at how good Taylor’s guitar playing sounds.

“It’s hard for me to believe that was him in his 20s,” Lindfors Taylor says. She didn’t meet Taylor until 1987, when he was already renowned for his playing. “You’d see him onstage and know it’s one person and one guitar,” she says. “But he’d sound like two.”

She says he’d tried to attend a guitar workshop at a North Carolina folk festival as a teen, but it was full, so he attended a banjo class, which might have influenced his percussive use of the thumb. Romano says Taylor’s DADGAD alternate tuning lent his guitar playing a distinctive sound.

“He never stopped having that touch,” Romano says. “You always know it’s him. And he could pick forever.”

Lovett adds, “His guitar parts were like an orchestra.”

‘Leave it alone’

Though Taylor was exacting with his lyrics, he saw them more as organic entities subject

to change: insects molting rather than trapped in amber. Some of the songs on “Early Eric Taylor” would undergo changes over the years, meaning even those he’d record in later years show up here in a novel form.

“He was always private, not wanting me to look or hear anything until he said, ‘Check this out,’” Lindfors Taylor says. “Then at that point, he might go out and play it, and sometimes, he’d never play it again.”

Gilmer recalls once learning “All the Way to Heaven” from Taylor’s 2001 album “Scuffletown.” Driving from Houston to a gig in Kerrville, he played the song over and over before a gig where he’d be backing Taylor.

“I wanted to play it perfectly,” he says. “And Eric said, ‘Now, we’re not doing that.’

“And he was so prolific he could write a great song and still throw it away.”

Gilmer bugged Taylor for years about recording and releasing “DC Song,” which opens “Early Eric Taylor.”

“He’d say, ‘No, leave it alone.’”

“Mr. Mooney” — one of the songs appearing for the first time — offers a nice glimpse into Taylor’s craft. “Maybe it’s true ol’ Mooney knew more than he would tell,” it begins, “‘bout three boys found near the edge of town 30 years ago in April.”

He understated character, pacing, metaphor. With only three or four minutes to tell his stories, he could bring those elements together to a knife’s point.

“It was literature,” Romano says. “He was a writer, and he was real proud of that. He would work on the words until he liked them. I always thought his songs were such an interesting intersection of poetry and prose. It was just literature.”

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