

“These are the original recordings, warts and all”

George Ensle pulled together his recordings from over the decades into a compilation Retrospective CD
by Mary Jane Farmer, Scene In Town

FIFTY YEARS IT'S BEEN, FIFTY YEARS SINCE George Ensle first got onto a stage and sang his songs. Fifty years later, he's still singing, still making music all across the Lone Star State.

The Houston Folk Music Archives at Rice University's Fondren Library recognized the contributions to folk and acoustic music that Ensle has made to Texas music and inducted him into its Archives Collection, which could also be called its Hall of Fame.

“When approached about going into the Archives,” Ensle said, “I got to thinking... I began in 1967, 50 years ago. Well, gee, that's kind of a milestone. It's only going to happen once.”

As his own personal celebration, Ensle pulled together his recordings from over the decades into a compilation CD, which he titled *Retrospective*. “I started with my first album, which came out in 1978 and which is out of print and even previously unreleased.”

There's 12 songs on *Retrospective* from that now-extinct first collection through the years. Some of those songs, such as “The Old Highway Cafe,” were previously recorded but never released until now.

“These are the original recordings, warts and all,” Ensle said, adding that he's now got a new CD in the works as well. “Stephen Doster will produce it and he has the old-school two-9 inch analogue reel to reel tape, and we're going to be getting a taste of that, in other words, we're going to record on that.” That project is expected to be ready for release in early 2018.

That's a lot of CD release parties in the making, too. Ensle will be in concert at the Kerrville Fall Music Festival, which runs from September 1-3 in Kerrville. Then again on November 9 at Rice University for the Houston Folk group and the next day, November 10, he'll release *Retrospective* at Anderson Fair in Houston.

Ensle has also released *Small Town Sundown, A Movie in Song*, 12 portrait songs of people, place, and happenings in the fictional town of Windmill, Texas. And believe me, Windmill comes alive through these pictures.

And here, let me say that George Ensle gets the second-ever Scene In Town award (tongue in cheek, but not really) Tom Paxton award. Years ago, folk singer Tom Paxton said from the Kerrville Festival stage that there's no sense in writing lyrics to songs unless you sing them clearly enough for people to un-

derstand every word. Well, George Ensle's earned this award. He presents every word to every song clearly and there is no confusion as to what he is singing. (David Byboth of North Texas earned the first-ever Tom Paxton award.)

Good Company

HOUSTON IS WHERE ENSLE got his start those 50 years ago, during the beginnings of the Progressive Country or Redneck Rock incarnation of Texas music. He remembers living just beneath Guy Clark, where they became good friends and met and played the same clubs with Townes Van Zandt when he traveled through and crashed on Clark's couch. “They were good friends and mentors,” Ensle said. Likewise, Billy Joe Shaver, who also was a frequent flyer in the

by-then veteran to perform at the festivals. Now, he lives in San Marcos, saying he preferred the smaller-town feel there.

Ensle and I first met when I, too, was with the Kerrville Festivals. But, it had been a long time since we'd crossed paths; that is, until we re-introduced ourselves at the Woody Guthrie Festival in Oklahoma last year.

Old home week, it was. George, a regular at WoodyFest, was back again this July, where he again wowed his crowd with his own brand of folk story songs, played mostly in his distinguishable finger picking style on a vintage Martin D-35.

That style began with his classical guitar training, and over the years he's honed it to mesh completely with his lyrics.

Hand crafted

“A NEW SERVICE I STARTED this last year is called Portrait Songs,” Ensle said. “These are custom-written songs written to paint a portrait of people's loved ones.” He compared it to hiring

someone to paint a portrait, except that he writes a song to paint that image. “Christine Albert started in a non-profit organization in the 1990s, pro-

vide a free concert called ‘Swan Songs’ for people in hospice care. She has people go sing personal concerts for these people, and includes their last requests if possible.

It's funded through grants. I “partnered with her for Portrait Songs, and have grants for 12 songs to be written for people in hospice, hopefully while they are still here, while they can still enjoy it. And have it left for their families as part of their legacy.”

To get a good picture of just whom these loved ones are, Ensle has developed a comprehensive questionnaire for the family members to complete. But, he's found out, “People tend to elaborate in conversation and steer me in the direction of where they want the song to go – they give me the inspiration I need. I don't have to meet the people (he's writing about), and I have even written some for people who have already passed.”

When asked how he can do this without getting too emotional about his subjects, Ensle

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— GEORGE ENSLE

they've heard a show. I capture characters. I just branched out in being able to do it for people in hospice. It's a kind of way of keeping that person alive, at least in their family's hearts.”

Portrait Songs

His Portrait Songs characters aren't all in hospice. “One guy's daughter commissioned me to write a song for his 75th birthday. He was a real character. He said that now, every morning, when he has his coffee, ‘I listen to my song.’”

His deepest challenge is one asked for about a three-year-old who had passed away. “If I can

one for a girl who wanted a song for her grandpa, he said. “All kinds of conditions and for all kinds of loved ones.”

There's an intrinsic reward in this specialized portrait songwriting. Ensle said, “There's the satisfaction of capturing someone's essence as a gift that they shared with the world. Everyone deserves a song, and everyone has the material in his or her lifetime for his or her own song. It's a way for family to get closure and healing and to celebrate — that's the main thing, to have their life celebrated in song.”

Ensle has also been playing Cowboy Churches and house concerts, along with his regular shows primarily in the Texas Hill Country. He's begun co-writing with Tony Ramey. In fact, they sat down together at WoodyFest and in a matter of a few short hours wrote a song while sharing that folk festival.

Ensle's excited, too, about songwriter workshops, about teaching others on a one-on-one basis. “I've been really motivated to share what I've learned over these 50 years, and so I've done some introspection about the process and a way to give others a short cut and insight about how it works and, as importantly, how it doesn't work, and giving encouragement about where they are in their journey.

“Only you can write your song. It's just a matter of finding it and finding your voice, and I love sharing what I've learned,” Ensle said.

More about George Ensle can be found on his Website,

GeorgeEnsle.com, and a sampling of his songs is available on his ReverbNation site. ■



The fifty years of accumulating material and refining it has come the fruition: George Ensle

Houston area.

Later, Ensle moved to Austin, and that's where Kerrville Folk Festival producer Rod Kennedy met and invited the

someone to paint a portrait, except that he writes a song to paint that image. “Christine Albert started in a non-profit organization in the 1990s, pro-

said, “It's what I do anyway. I write portrait songs, and that's kind of how I got the idea. People have said, ‘You sure paint a wonderful portrait of people,’ after

capture that, I know it's to heal.’ Ensle has written for a ballet dancer, and another for a girl's boyfriend; one for a guy whose mother has passed away; and

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