

Eric Gnezda – Artist Profile

By Wendy Whitney Raphael

The ballroom in Cincinnati's Omni Netherland Plaza hotel is packed with employees of an international corporation celebrating its centennial anniversary. The cacophony of concurrent conversations that reigned over the room earlier in the evening has been replaced by a hush that is equally pervasive.

Eric Gnezda's lyrics, written in solitude, swirl about the ears of an audience clearly listening. Singing into the microphone, Eric lifts his eyes from his piano keys, and with a disarming gaze, penetrates the audience before him. Seated well within the crowd, you could swear he was looking at you.

The music that springs from the depths of Eric's soul travels a pure and simple path into the hearts of his listeners. In many ways, the road that led Eric to where he is today was also pure and simple.

Both music and writing are passions which took hold of Eric in childhood. Repeatedly selected to sing in school choirs, and for 10 years a drummer in several bands, Eric was also chosen for the lead roles in his high school musicals. From the time he was in grade school, he also enjoyed what he describes as "painting pictures with words."

But it was in his 17th year, while first writing lyrics for some music he created at his piano, that Eric knew he had found his life's purpose: "It was then that I finally brought my two greatest passions together."

Joyous as that pivotal moment was for Eric, during the years preceding it, he had not escaped his share of life's agonies and pains. Three days after Eric's birth, his father was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a torturous disease that eventually claimed his life. The intense suffering his dad endured over many years inescapably permeated the Gnezdass' home life; it also cut into Eric's soul like nothing else since. His song, "Daddy's Wheels," grew out of those experiences.

Yet, Eric is quick to point out that for all he learned about pain, he also learned "four lifetimes of lessons about the power of love and how to hang together to survive." Eric's penetrating insights, derived from such "lessons," powerfully infuse the music with which he entertains and inspires people of all ages and backgrounds.

Like most creative compulsions, songwriting has become for Eric a way to transcend his life's struggles; performing his songs has become a way to help others transcend theirs as well.

"Some of my best stuff," confesses Eric, "has been written under the worst conditions

imaginable, and during the most exhausting, despondent periods of my life." Two of his most frequently requested love songs, in fact, are those he wrote, not during the passionate throes of a love affair, but rather in the dismal wake of one that painfully ground to a halt.

In addition to love songs, Eric's catalog consists of compositions which embrace more expansive subjects. "Blossoms of Hope" is a favorite among cancer survivors, and "True Heroes" has been used to pay tribute to veterans, first responders, firefighters and others who devote themselves to service.

One of Eric's recent works is a call for Americans to rise above "Red State-Blue State" divisions, to endeavor to trust each other enough to become more united, and to once again value and reestablish civility in our culture. The song, "Is This America," continues to garner widespread attention from across the political spectrum and was featured at the Citizens' Civility Symposium in Washington, D.C.

His anthem, "Everyone Wins," has been used nationally to promote the Special Olympics and later became the culminating theme for the national television coverage of the AAU Junior Olympics.

"Probably more than any other song," Eric acknowledges, "'Everyone Wins' defines my vision for this world and how we should strive to live."

...And so we move along, not sure just where it ends;
We take a fall, then get up once again.
We just never know when something we might do
will knock somebody down, or maybe pull them through.

Everyone wins when we're holding on together.
Everyone wins when we reach with all we have.
When we give ourselves to something that comes from deep within...
Everyone wins.

In the Omni ballroom, the audience now converges in a wave of laughter, all eyes upon the performer who skillfully, deliberately evoked it. The humor has been unexpected, following so close on the heels of a song that has left many eyes moist with tears. Nevertheless, it is humor well placed; it is immediately embraced by an audience that, now more than ever, feels understood.

"Humor is an effective tool for me as a performer," Eric concedes. "But it's also been a lifelong survival tactic. I absolutely depend on it to keep perspective."

In fact, Eric has received nearly as much national acclaim for his humorous pieces as he has for his more serious, soul-gripping songs.

What strikes one most about Eric's humor is that it is based on love rather than hostility. Indeed, in naming Eric "Best Satirist of the Year," *Columbus Monthly* magazine described him as "witty and caustic without being cruel." There is no mistaking the fact that the heart which spawns his most serious songs is the same heart that drives his humor.

"It's the same heart all right," Eric laughingly agrees.

Meanwhile, back in Eric's private office, a file drawer bulges with lyrics sheets of the 200 or so songs he has written. The only file drawer more crammed is the one containing letters from his fans; Eric shrugs in compliance when his visitor asks to examine that drawer's contents.

One is immediately struck by the wide diversity of people from whom such letters have come. A corporate executive asserts, "I don't know when we had a presenter who moved the audience more"...A teenager avows, "You're the only singer who seems to understand how people feel"...

A world-renowned statesman writes, "I was especially touched by the messages your song [Everyone Wins] conveys"...A note painstakingly scrawled by an obviously elderly, arthritic hand begins, "Your music has touched my heart and soul."

It is that very music which now lures Eric's visitor out to his "Piano Room." The instrument on which Eric creates his music stands in a room virtually unadorned by anything else; any richness pervading the room is heard rather than seen.

Eric glides onto his piano bench with the same natural ease with which people all over the world sit down to their evening meals. Yet, the lyrics that now swell the room somehow address a hunger, which if not as readily recognized as that for physical sustenance, is at least more deeply felt...

...When you stop to think about it, you see that life has shown
that when you win the world is with you, when you lose you lose alone.
If you wonder if it's worth it under such a circumstance,
just think of those who never take the chance...

In the end, listening to Eric Gnezda's heart is to have finally, unmistakably heard one's own.

Wendy Whitney Raphael is a Chicago-based writer.

"Everyone Wins" and "The Gold" ©G-Ball Music (ASCAP). All rights reserved. gnezda.com