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OCTOBER 13, 2004

"Music Is Bigger Than Any Of Us."

In a career that spans four decades, Spartanburg singer-songwriter David Ezell has left a lasting impression on musicians and fans.

BY [JAMES NICHOLS](#)

This Saturday, the Handlebar will host a tribute to Spartanburg singer-songwriter David Ezell. Ezell, who has already undergone surgery for cancer of the lymph nodes, begins radiation treatments this week. The concert, which will hopefully help Ezell receive the more widespread recognition and acclaim he deserves, will also raise funds to help cover his medical expenses. Saturday's lineup will feature an assortment of the Upstate's finest musicians and songwriters.

"He's pretty easily the best unsigned songwriter in South Carolina," enthuses Peter Cooper, author of *Hub City Music Makers* and music writer for the Nashville *Tennessean*. According to Cooper, Ezell is "a magnificent talent. He never made a record, which remains shocking to me. I live in Nashville and write about music for a living. Everybody's got a record or ten. David is every bit the writer that the greats in Nashville are. The problem is that nobody can go to the store and pick up his music. David has better songs than most anyone. 'Beautiful Women.' 'All My Labor's Done.' 'I Know How It Feels To Love' is one of the most melodically interesting songs. He has these melodies that take you on a trip. 'Leaning Forward' is probably my favorite. He has so many wonderful lines in there. It's like something Guy Clark would write."

Cooper is not alone in his enthusiasm for Ezell. "This man has made his whole life communicating through song, through his voice," says Gene Berger, a friend of Ezell's, producer of the tribute concert and owner of Horizon Records. "It's time for him to get his due. He has a way with his guitar and voice like nobody. He's not just a folk singer-songwriter; he's a rocker - and he's one of the most humble people you'll ever meet."

Humility is, indeed, a significant part of Ezell's character. He's typically self-effacing when asked about the upcoming concert in his honor. "It's a strange position to be in. There are so many other people out there suffering, either physically or mentally or financially," he says. "They did a thing for me in July at the Guitar Bar, in Spartanburg. That was really, really intense. The thing that made it really gratifying, finally, after it was over, was to hear that it was so well attended. But it was just a great gathering of people and music, and when I heard that it just made me feel so good because that's really what it's all about. Music is bigger than any of us. It's more about the music and a chance for people to gather and have a good time."

Since the late 19th century, Spartanburg has developed a rich musical legacy. From jazz and blues to gospel and rhythm & blues to good, old fashioned rock'n'roll, Spartanburg musicians and bands such as "Pink" Anderson, Johnny Blowers, Uncle Walt's Band and the Marshall Tucker Band have left their mark on virtually every genre and style of music.



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David Ezell, 54, comes from an old Spartanburg family; a major thoroughfare, W.O. Ezell Blvd., is named for his grandfather. He was "born and reared" in Spartanburg, and showed an early interest in music. "Mother tells me that since I was 2 or 3 years old, whenever someone played guitar, I'd just sit in front of the TV mesmerized," he reminisces. "My earliest remembrances were Ricky Nelson on *Ozzie and Harriet*. That was, I guess, the late '50s. Of course, he'd always sing a song at the end. They let me stay up for that," he recalls with a laugh.

Like millions of other kids of his generation, the young Ezell was particularly influenced by a certain group of lads from Liverpool. "And then the Beatles hit Ed Sullivan and changed the meaning of life. I ended up getting a guitar February of '64; I was 13. I started taking guitar lessons that summer."

Ezell played in his first bands while still in high school. "I got an electric guitar when I was 15 or 16. I played mostly electric throughout my high school years, and I taught guitar at an early age, which was a privilege. The first bands were Beatles-esque. I just really gravitated to that sound, the songs, the beauty of the harmonies. Like the Hollies, the Knickerbockers, the Byrds, mid '60s sounds. I did two or three bands with that sort of thing."

He soon began to expand his musical horizons, adding soul and R&B sounds to the mix of songs he covered and wrote. "I'd already been fascinated by the rhythm & blues. And then around '66 or '67 I remember I was riding down Reidville Road in Spartanburg when Sam & Dave came on the radio singing 'Hold On, I'm Comin'."

The freedom of the AM airwaves in the late '60s broadened the young Ezell's musical palette considerably. "WLAC, WLS, were these AM stations," he recalls. "At night, you could pick them up out of Nashville, Knoxville or New York City with the old transistor radio, because back then a lot of the stations would go off the air at 6 o'clock and free up the airwaves."

During this period, Ezell became a regular at Spartanburg's Wofford Coffee House. "I went down there on a Friday, there must've been about 15 people there, about 11 o'clock at night," he remembers. "This girl was singing. She was fairly good. There was a neat vibe there, with candles and things. And after 2 or 3 songs, this guy stands up and he says, 'There's someone here that it would be a real shame if we didn't ask him to get up and sing or play.' And I started looking around like, 'Who's here?' Cause I didn't recognize any faces. And he turned around to me... So, I got up there and started playing and singing, and people *liked* it. But, see, they didn't know me!," he laughs, recalling the moment from decades before. "So, I ended up playing and singing for about an hour, hour and a half, and no one left, so they asked me if I'd like to do a regular night there, and I said 'yes.' So that started it all. I believe that was the summer of 1970. Those were great times."

Eventually, Ezell chose to forsake playing in rock bands for solo performance. He also began to come into his own as a songwriter. "I actually wrote my first song when I was with the rhythm & blues band," Ezell notes. "I wish I could have kept this up: I wrote two songs the first night I wrote one. That's never happened since (*laughs*)! And then others came along during high school, but it wasn't until I started playing solo that I maybe had half a dozen. That was sort of the next phase. You had the electric stuff going on, and at the same time you had early James Taylor, before the *Sweet Baby James* album came out. You had Crosby, Stills & Nash, you had Joni Mitchell, all that going on. Very lyric oriented. I gravitated towards that. I remember people coming over to my apartment when I was 19 and *making* them sit down and listen to Joni Mitchell's 'Song For Free' and read the lyric sheet."

At the Wofford Coffee House, Ezell befriended future members of several important Spartanburg groups, including Uncle Walt's Band. David Ball, bassist for that famous trio, recalls his early memories of Ezell.

"Ezell had a real cool thing going," says Ball. "I remember being real knocked out. He was someone we all looked up to. I just thought of Ezell as a top

caliber songwriter. It was good to see people as involved in music as we were."

To all his friends and fans, Ezell's talents are undeniable. But the question of why he has never recorded an album in a career that spans four decades remains largely unanswered. "I think David is very concerned with finding the perfect circumstance," remarks Cooper. "The perfect way to sing the perfect song. He waited out some situations that others would have jumped at. David is a wonderful songwriter, but not much of a self-promoter. He helps others. He helped Malcolm Holcombe find an audience. He's always propping up people who are important to him. David never had much of a marketing plan. But he impresses people."

Some of those people will gather in Greenville this Saturday night to pay tribute to the talented Mr. Ezell. For someone who has never made a record, this guy has had a profound impact on the music scene - and he's not done yet.

"Leaning Forward (Lover, Come Inside)"

Lover, come inside,
Try to see what I'm seein'
Sometimes it's hard for me
To be what I'm bein'
I must say it now, before I slip away
You know I can't say it any other way.
It's hard when you know
You ain't got much to show
For all the time you've spent not givin' in
Now what I'm searchin' for
Lies behind an open door
But somehow, something just won't let me in.
My pockets make no sound
Ain't nothin' jinglin' round
No coins, or keys, or leads, just my needs
Just a couple of guitar picks
That ain't taught me no new tricks,
And a note that says for me to call my mother.
Now, Momma, listen to me
You can't know what I'm knowin'
A little more faith in me
Though I've nothin' to be showin'
Yes, I'm back down to a hundred 'n thirty
And it's true, these hands seldom get dirty
Just some ink marks on my fingers where the lines put up a fight
And some new calluses from playin' this gui-tar
All Saturday night.
But when you're leaning forward and still tryin' not to fall,
That don't leave a man much room to stand at all
So I'm lovin' every lover
Over and over again
Tryin' to make my way across this land
I'm just followin' the lines upon my hands.
So lover, come inside
Can you see what I'm seein'
It's always hard for me
To be what I'm bein'
I must say it now before I fade away
I could never say it any other way.

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