

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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STEPHEN GANTRELL/staff photographer

David Brogren stands outside his Birmingham home, where he is building a performance area above the garage. Brogren presents a different American music artist each month at la Casa, in his living room.

La Casa is home to music

By Stewart Franck special writer

DAVID BROGREN is standing on his son's bed, which, for the time being, is a mattress on the den floor. He is singing, eyes closed. The song is "Winnipeg," an unreleased song written by a Brooklyn country artist and friend, Tom Russell.

Brogren's son, Nels, stands quietly on the stairs behind me in full Ghostbusters regalia, a purple plastic laser thrust toward his enraptured father. As Brogren ends the song, full of beautifully detailed imagery, Nels quietly says, "Dad, you're standing on my bed."

Welcome to show night at la Casa, the one Saturday night of each month in which Brogren and his wife, Annie, transform their living room into the most intimate live performance venue in the area. On this night, they will be seating close to 40 people, just five feet from their kitchen.

Despite this impromptu performance, Brogren is not a performer. Instead, he is an American music infatuate, an altruistic folk im-

pressario. His "stable" income is derived from owning his own Birmingham-based insurance agency. His commitment to music is one of passion, not money. Tired of booking and promoting shows featuring legendary songwriters such as Russell, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Fred Koller and Carl Brouse at largely uncooperative clubs in the area, Brogren turned entrepreneur.

IN 1989, he and Annie began bringing the shows to their home in Birmingham. They quickly dubbed it la Casa, began a postal promotional system and brought in the artists.

When it comes to Brogren's "mission" — la Casa — he is the best of zealots — an emerging self-effacing fan. "I feel a part of the creative process when I produce these shows," he says. "I consider myself an artist. I mean, my canvas is a little different, but there's no denying that this is an artistic function."

One Saturday a month, one of the new Nashville's finest singer-songwriters makes a stop at la Casa. David, Annie and their two children then surrender their sleeping quarters to the traveling musi-

cians, explaining this current communal den.

"Everybody makes an allowance in their lives," Brogren said, "whether it's to go to the beach or country club. Our allowance is having these people come in and share our house one weekend a month. That's not a weird deal."

The music, which Brogren simply refers to as "American music," is the narrative song of the everyday man. It is the closest in ethos to country, yet shares the instrumentation and rural heritage of folk. It is a vigorous hybrid of American cultural expression, some of the performers espouse the social conservatism of country music, while many are part of the counter-culture explosion of the '60s and '70s.

SEVERAL OF THE artists who play la Casa — Koller, Hal Ketchum, Russell, Guy Clark — have written country hits for others or are blossoming stars in their own right.

"For a long time," Brogren says, "there was a small clique of us here who loved this counter-culture music. We thought we were right on top of it. But now that I'm div-

ing into it, I find it goes layers deep."

The shows at la Casa, which Brogren largely built himself, are promoted out of a sense of love and purpose, not with the thought of getting rich. "Certainly I could bring in people I'd make money on," Brogren explains, "but nobody's rich in this, everybody's struggling. It's just my unbridled desire to bring in people I want to see."

Shows average 35-50 people. "I've had people say that they could rearrange what I was doing so I could make money. But I'd have to change my focus. Given the amount of money that I stand to make or lose, I don't want to compromise content."

Brogren is currently building a 600-square-foot performance area above his garage. This winter, the shows will move out of the living room into the new la Casa. The audiences at la Casa are generally enlightened, already familiar with the featured artists' work or just trusting Brogren's aesthetic premise.

Please turn to next Page

'Show Boat' star back in Detroit one more time

"Show Boat" runs Friday, Nov. 16, through Sunday, Nov. 25, at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit. For ticket information call the MOT Hotline, 874-SING, or Ticketmaster at 645-6666.

By Mary Jane Doerr special writer

WHEN EDDIE BRACKEN steps on stage at Detroit's Fisher Theatre on Friday evening with Michigan Opera Theatre's "Show Boat," it will not be the first time he has played Cap'n Andy Hawkes or the first time he has played the Fisher.

"I've been here so many times I think I own the place," said the "poor little rich boy" star of silent pictures "Our Gang" whose career has spanned every form of visual entertainment for 70 years. During the run of "Show Boat," Bracken will hit his 13,500th performance on the legitimate stage, setting an unofficial all-time record for an actor.

This "Show Boat" run is especially nostalgic. In 1938, on the national tour of the successful "Brother Rat," the cast stayed at the Leland Hotel while playing the Cass Theatre. Bracken's future wife, Connie Nickerson, was on that tour. This "Show Boat" company is staying at the Ramada, the old Leland Hotel.

"I introduced Dest Arnaz and Lucille Ball during the movie 'Too Many Girls,'" said Bracken, who declares anyone can figure out his age. "They were married here three days after the movie ended."

Another vivid memory is when he was in Detroit playing "You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running" and Deborah Kerr was appearing in "Tea and Sympathy" at the old Michigan Theatre. Bracken sent her a telegram saying, "How great can an actress be!"

ONCE HE WAS playing at the Cass Theatre, and he remembers Julie Harris came back and asked for his autograph.

His telephone conversation is short, spanning decades in his legendary life. In recent months, he has done episodes on "Wiseguy," "Golden Girls" and "Empty Nest," which are scheduled to air this month. Only in town for two days to brush up on



Eddie Bracken plays Cap'n Andy

staging, he is flying out to California to shoot the latest Sylvester Stallone movie "Over."

"The young people don't know who I am so I have to get myself back on the national scene," said Bracken. "I am concentrating on being home more now. So my time, on the road now is more sporadic."

Please turn to next Page

Local actors in MOT show

A number of area residents are featured in the cast of the Michigan Opera Theatre production of "Show Boat," opening Friday and continuing through Sunday, Nov. 25, at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit.

They are Mary Donawetz of West Bloomfield as the young Kim; Joe Donawetz of West Bloomfield, supernumerary; Jay Peterson of Southfield, ensemble; Virginia Rosemary Winters of Southfield, ensemble; John Hopkins of Westland, dancer; Donna Lewis (daughter of Diana Lewis of WXYZ-TV) of Farmington Hills, ensemble; Judith Seel of Troy, ensemble; Paul Silver of Troy, as Steve, lead actor on the show boat; Elizabeth Wingert of Birmingham, ensemble; Richard Marlatt of Birmingham as Sheriff Vallon, and Jim Wilking of Walled Lake, ensemble.

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