

50 songs for 50 states

Swanville musician commemorates America's 250th anniversary

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Morrison County Record

When David Armstrong sat down at his home studio in Swanville earlier this year, he didn't set out to write just another album. He set out to write America.

In a burst of creativity that spanned about two months, Armstrong — a lifelong musician who has performed rock, country and gospel — wrote and recorded a song for every state in the Union. The result is a three-CD collection of 50 original songs tied to the 250th anniversary of the United States.

"I had no idea it was going to take this much time," Armstrong said. He often woke at 4 a.m. to write, when the house was quiet and the phone wasn't ringing. "Fifty songs took like 60 days," he said. "It was a project."

The collection, now available on streaming platforms and CD, is Armstrong's way of celebrating the nation's semiquincentennial with what he knows best: music.

FROM BLACK SABBATH TO GARTH BROOKS

Armstrong's musical story stretches back five decades.

He picked up the guitar at 16, playing six hours a day as a self-described "fanatic" and cutting his teeth on the riffs of Led Zeppelin, Ted Nugent and Black Sabbath. In high school he cycled through bands with names like Poison Blood and Electrify, first as the kid they "taught guitar to," later as the lead player.

Those early years were rooted firmly in rock.

"I mastered all of Tony Iommi's leads," Armstrong recalled, describing how he lugged his guitar and amp downstairs to impress his dad with Black Sabbath songs — only to find his father was less than thrilled with heavy metal.

College brought more bands and a turning point. After a would-be lead singer



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David Armstrong of Swanville wrote and recorded 50 songs for 50 states over a 60-day period in honor of the 250th anniversary of our nation's independence. Armstrong is pictured above in this publicity photo.

failed to show up for a showcase with a booking agent, Armstrong was pushed to step to the microphone. The agent recorded the band playing a Toto song; afterward, the agent asked who the singer was.

"That was David on stage," the drummer told him. The revelation led to Armstrong being named lead singer, sharing duties with the original vocalist.

From there, Armstrong toured with a group called Flat Broke, playing small towns and Canadian dates. He shifted between bass and keyboards, learning the vocal craft from three singers out of Berkeley, California, whom he still describes as "amazing."

At one point, a Nashville talent scout heard him win a karaoke contest with a Rhythmic Brothers number and urged him to come to Tennessee and sign. Armstrong turned it down. He was running multiple businesses in Fargo, farming, and raising kids.

"It just wasn't the right time," he said.

A FARM KID TUNED TO COUNTRY RADIO

The move from rock to

country was gradual and practical. Armstrong was farming, and the only stations he could reliably get in the tractor cab were country.

"Next thing you know, I was listening to Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson and Tracy Lawrence," he said. Those artists became his template as he developed his own country writing style.

Around that time, his future wife spotted him playing a keyboard at the state fair and decided he needed better equipment. Even though they were only dating, she bought him the keyboard on the spot — an early investment in what would become a sprawling home studio and a catalogue that now includes roughly 30 CDs' worth of material.

Over the years, Armstrong accumulated instruments — at one point as many as 200 guitars — and, after moving to Swanville, built a full recording studio in his home. A young engineer from Fargo, a classmate of his son's, helped design and set up the system, and together they cut five CDs in a single summer.

With digital tools, Armstrong learned to record, mix

and master his own tracks.

"Now they've got programs that you can just mix and master all your own," he said. "It sounds really, really good compared to what it used to sound like years ago."

REINVENTING HIMSELF AS "ARMSTRONG"

Behind the stage name is a story that reshaped Armstrong's life and music.

Years ago, while unloading a car from a dolly, Armstrong got pinned between vehicles. His right arm — the arm he uses to play guitar and keyboards — was torn off.

Rushed to Little Falls, he crossed paths with a surgeon who happened to be driving through town. The doctor spent about seven hours painstakingly reattaching nerves and veins. Armstrong, in excruciating pain, remembers asking for "the black pill" when he thought he would never play again.

The operation was a success. His arm healed, and he eventually returned to playing. In gratitude, he dedicated his first CD to the surgeon and adopted "Armstrong" as his stage name

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— a nod to the limb that was restored and the promise he made.

He told God, he said, that if he ever got his arm back, he would use it to make music for a purpose.

"From that point on, all of music had to be real positive, uplifting and upbeat," his wife explained. "Nothing negative, no crying in your beer kind of stuff — something that puts a smile on people's faces."

Armstrong says listeners now tell him they're "spoiled" by his catalog and prefer his optimistic songs over darker fare.

BUILDING A ONE-MAN LABEL IN A STREAMING WORLD

Rather than chase another shot at Nashville, Armstrong and his

wife built their own independent label. Drawing on his experience running factories, publishing artwork and launching inventions out of Fargo, he approached music as both an art and a small business.

In the studio, he plays nearly all the parts himself, layering guitars, keys, bass and vocals. Online, he releases his work under multiple personas — from a blues singer named Eli Caraway to a reggae-flavored act and a high-register pop-country hybrid he calls Heart Wave.

It's like he's got different personalities, in a sense," his wife Meg said. "But he's just doing all the voices."

The couple first uploaded music to platforms like SoundCloud, AudioMack and Bandcamp, and later used the digital distributor

DistroKid to push releases to Spotify, iHeartRadio and other major services. A collaborator they met on a cruise now produces YouTube videos for his tracks, often pairing Armstrong's vocals with cinematic visuals and lyric overlays.

Still, finding an audience in the streaming era has been a challenge.

"You can make all this music, but how do you get it out there?" his wife said.

Early attempts to hire marketers and promoters led to dead ends and scams, including one would-be promoter who demanded \$1,800 up front and never delivered. Now, they avoid unsolicited pitches and instead seek out companies with established reputations, including a Phoenix-based firm that recently placed

125,000 social media ads promoting Armstrong's work.

They've also tried old-fashioned outreach, mailing CDs and links to state tourism offices and governors' staffs, offering the state-themed songs for free use. A few offices called back, but much of that work is still percolating.

A SOUNDTRACK FOR A MILESTONE BIRTHDAY

Armstrong's 50-songs project is both a personal milestone and a bid to connect his music to a national moment.

Inspired in part by stories of monumental

undertakings like Mount Rushmore, he set out to create something equally ambitious in scope, if not in granite. Each song is tied to a state, filtered through his signature blend of country, pop and what he calls Heart Wave — a symphonic, emotionally charged style that leans on strings and soaring vocals.

Alongside those, he continues to record gospel songs such as "Full Armor of God" and deeply personal tracks like "The Authentic You," which his wife describes as "phenomenal" and "more emotionally charged."

From the studio in Swanville that few people

know exists, Armstrong has quietly assembling a body of work that spans genres, personas and now geography — a home-grown soundtrack for a country celebrating 250 years.

For listeners curious to explore, Armstrong's music can be found under David Armstrong on major streaming platforms and on his YouTube channel, {span}@davidarmstrong3544{/span}. A website, davidarmstrongonline.com, also points to his latest releases and projects.

"I'm just trying to do real positive music," he said. "Something that puts a smile on people's faces."