

## **ELLIS PAUL OFFICIAL BIO**

***A singer songwriter is only as good as the times he reflects. In times like these, when so many nuts are running the show, it's comforting to know that Ellis Paul is actually holding our sanity on his own stage! Wise, tender, brilliant and biting, Ellis is one of our best human compasses, marking in melodies and poems where we've been and where we might go if we so choose to. Personally Ellis, I'm goin' where you're goin'! --Nora Guthrie (Woody Guthrie's daughter)***

Ellis Paul is one of the leading voices in American songwriting. He was a principle leader in the wave of singer/songwriters that emerged from the Boston folk scene, creating a movement that revitalized the national acoustic circuit with an urban, literate, folk pop style that helped renew interest in the genre in the 1990's.

His charismatic, personally authentic performance style has influenced a generation of artists away from the artifice of pop, and closer towards the realness of folk. Though he remains among the most pop-friendly of today's singer-songwriters - his songs regularly appear in hit movie and TV soundtracks - he has bridged the gulf between the modern folk sound and the populist traditions of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger more successfully than perhaps any of his songwriting peers.

Yet to hear him at this crossroads moment in his career, you would think he was just getting started. For years, he has been among the folk circuit's most popular and dependable headliners, with a mailing list of over 20,000 fiercely loyal fans. He has released 14 CDs, and recently explored new media avenues with a documentary/concert DVD called "3,000 Miles," and "Notes from the Road," a critically acclaimed book of poems and stories.

In recent years, he has also departed from his solo career to tour and record with longtime compadre Vance Gilbert, and to indulge his deep respect for American folk icon Woody Guthrie. He appeared with the all-star Guthrie tribute tour, "Ribbons of Highway, Endless Skyway." For his Philo CD, "The Speed of Trees," he wrote a modern musical setting of Guthrie's unpublished lyric "God's Promise."

Nora Guthrie, Woody's daughter, invited Paul to perform at a Woody Guthrie tribute show held in September 1996 at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio. The show was part of a 10-day celebration to honor Woody and also included performances by Bruce Springsteen, Ani DiFranco, Billy Bragg and others. In 1998, the quintessential Boston songwriter was also made an honorary citizen of Guthrie's birthplace, Okemah, Oklahoma, in recognition of all he has done to revive interest in the Dust Bowl troubadour.

This may surprise casual fans of Paul's urbane, literate and thoroughly modern folk-pop sound - but not those who knew him well. Among the first to single him out from the vast pack clamoring to rise from Boston's open mics in the early '90s was Bill Morrissey, even then considered the definitive New England ballad writer. He was so impressed, he produced Paul's first record, "Say Something," in 1993.

What did he see, so early in Paul's career? "He was always unique," Morrissey recalls. "He didn't write like anybody, didn't sing like anybody, didn't perform like anybody. So many of the songwriters then were trying to imitate whoever they thought was successful. Ellis was always himself; he didn't try to separate himself from his audiences. Perhaps it's because he's a Mainer; there's no pretense, and I think audiences sense that."

Paul is today regarded as such a classic urban songwriter that it's hard to fathom what a small-town boy he was. He grew up in northern Maine, in a potato farming community so remote that his exposure to music came almost entirely from the one top-40 station he could get on his radio, and his school band, where he played trumpet well enough to earn a summer scholarship to the Berklee College of Music.

He toured the country competing in track, catching a hard case of wanderlust, and earning a track scholarship to Boston College.

It was there that he discovered songwriting, completely out of boredom when a track-career-ending knee injury left him bedridden for months, and he began making up songs on a guitar a friend had given him. By 1989, he was haunting the open mic scene that would soon produce the most important generation of Boston folk stars since the early '60s, including Paul, Dar Williams, Vance Gilbert, Jonatha Brooke and Jennifer Kimball (then performing as The Story), Martin Sexton, Patty Griffin, and Catie Curtis.

Almost immediately, Paul's infectious melodicism, literate lyrics, and honest performing style drew attention. As early as 1993, the Boston Globe was calling him a songwriter's songwriter, adding that "no emerging songwriter in recent memory has been more highly touted and respected by songwriters."

While his style was highly introspective at that time, it was also informed by a probing humanism shaped in part by the five years he spent as a social worker. Every day, he struggled to help poor urban kids hovering dangerously on the edges of the criminal justice and welfare systems.

Recalling those days, Paul says, "It definitely gave me a whole new vision of what the world could be like. Even BC was about as safe an environment as you could find. Picking up kids at the projects, breaking up fights, talking to parole officers and psychologists, getting to know this side of life I'd never been exposed to, really opened my mind up. From that, maybe I took sort of a wide-eyed view of the world around me, which seeped into my music."

His skyrocketing career is still the stuff of legend in Boston folk circles; how quickly he climbed from opening act for the likes of Morrissey, Shawn Colvin, and John Gorka, to national headliner and recording star.

Morrissey recalls something else that set him apart back then: his artistic curiosity. Paul would pepper him with questions about who influenced him, which songwriters he should be listening to. He was discovering what a rich, ancient community this music was - and he wanted to dive right into the deep end.

"You know, that's a very smart thing to do," says Morrissey. "It helped set him apart. A lot of young singers I meet are not curious about what went on before; they just say, 'I want to sing another song about my life.' Paul has a sense of roots, of connectedness to the whole history of folk music; he sees the thread that runs through all the generations of this music."

In particular, Paul fell under the spell of Woody Guthrie, who wrote "This Land Is Your Land," "Pastures of Plenty," and a thousand other American anthems. By 1998, Paul was telling the Boston Globe that Woody, to him, was "ground zero, the prototype in a long line of people I'm a huge fan of." He put a Woody Guthrie tattoo on his arm, solemnly telling people it was "a commitment."

An increasingly topical humanism informed his work. Like Guthrie a half-century before, Paul displayed a humble genius for putting the most divisive issues of his day into starkly personal and emotional terms. "She loves a girl," he sang. "What are you going to do if you love her, too?"

"I feel like I'm more a part of a community now than just a songwriter singing about my own struggles and the struggles of the friends I see around me," Paul says of his career today. "Maybe that's the difference between being a singer-songwriter and being a folk musician, that transition into more of a community sense of writing. "

At the same time, Paul remains the most mainstream-friendly folk songwriter to emerge from Boston since Tom Rush. Between 1993 and 2004, he won an unprecedented 13 Boston Music Awards, and his songs were heard on hit TV shows Ed and MTV's Real World; and in the soundtracks of several Farrelly Brothers films, including "Me, Myself, & Irene," starring Jim Carrey, and "Shallow Hal," with Jack Black and Gwyneth Paltrow. Director Peter Farrelly has called Paul "a national treasure."

It would be easy - perhaps even advisable - to become complacent after succeeding so remarkably at all the things he set out to do. But there is a restlessness in Paul these days, a vibrant, glowing spirit of artistic adventure. Success to him is not a prize to clutch and protect, but an open door to a wider journey.

"There are differences between the me now and the me I was in the early '90s," he says quietly. "I have a reliable fan base that keeps a roof over my head, for which I'm so thankful. And I think they're also willing and forgiving enough for me to go through any evolution I choose, as long as the core of what I do is honest, and that I continue to write songs and stories about the things I see around me.

"I need to keep feeling refreshed. I've been down the Ellis Paul rabbit-hole, you know, and now I'm looking around and trying to learn new things, experience other people's music and stories. I have no idea where I'm headed, but I think it'll make me a broader artist. "

That sounds like a very safe bet.