

## Ellis Paul Biography - LONG

*“Despite his success and sense of history, Mr. Paul remains an artist with his eye on the future and an interest in discovering the transformative potential in his music.” - The New York Times*

Some artists document their lives through their music. Others chronicle their times. It's a rare artist who can do both, telling their own story through songs that also encapsulate the essence of people and places who have helped define their era overall. Woody Guthrie comes to mind, and so does Bob Dylan. Bruce Springsteen certainly as well. Yet few others, for whatever genius they may possess, can relate their own history to the history experienced by those who find that common bond, be it in a coming of age, living through the same realities or sharing similar experiences.

Ellis Paul is one of those gifted singer/songwriters. Though some may refer to him as a folk singer, he is more, for lack of a better word, a singular storyteller, a musician whose words reach out from inside and yet also express the feelings, thoughts and sensibilities that most people can relate to in one way or another, regardless of age or upbringing. The exhilaration of the open road. A celebration of heroes. The hope for redemption. Descriptions of those things that are both near and dear. The sharing of love..., intimate, passionate and enduring.

These are the scenarios that emerge from Ellis Paul's new album, *Chasing Beauty*, a set of songs which detail, in typical Paul fashion, stories of people and places that reflect larger truths about us all. “Kick Out the Lights (Johnny Cash)” pays tribute to that fearless American icon name-checked in its title. “Plastic Soldier” offers homage to a wounded soldier returning from Afghanistan. A real-life barnstorming pilot takes the spotlight in “Jimmie Angel's Flying Circus,” while iconic Boston blue-collar musician Dennis Brennan takes the focus in “Waiting on a Break.” Even the Empire State Building and the Boston Red Sox get their due, via “Empire State” and “UK Girl (Boston Calling),” respectively.

In reality, these stories are a continuation of tales Paul has told for more than a quarter century, over the expanse of nineteen albums, numerous critical kudos (15 Boston Music Awards alone), inclusion in several movie soundtracks, and stages he's headlined both near and far. “I've got a car with over 475,000 miles on it, and it's my third road vehicle,” Paul declares. “I've been doing 200 shows a year for over twenty years. There isn't a town in the country where I won't find a friend. I'm a nomad. And I'm gonna write and play until I'm gone.”

No doubt he will. Still, it's somewhat ironic that Paul gravitated towards this bigger world of intent and expression given that the place Paul considers his hometown these days isn't New York or Nashville, or Boston or Austin or Charlottesville, VA. where he lives, but rather Presque Isle, Maine, a tiny enclave surrounded by three rivers. Not surprisingly, the name translates to “almost an island.” Presque Isle shares a vanishing tradition with many small towns these days, where family farms are giving way to industrialization and giant corporations, and earning a livelihood from the land is no longer the simple option it once was. Nevertheless, it's still a haven for traditional values and for people as real and authentic as the soil they once tilled. If there's one grace left to cling to, it's the grace of nature's beauty, sealed off by the surrounding mountains and fields.

Likewise, his geographical origins also couldn't have been further from the world at large. He was born in the dead of winter in the small town of Fort Kent, Maine, a place nestled right up next to the Canadian border. He came from humble origins, a family of potato farmers who could count among their forebears a veteran of the battle of Gettysburg, whose heroism on that field of honor earned him the 140 acres of Maine farmland that his descendants would continue to sow. It was the place that taught Paul the meaning of hard work and self-reliance, and the values that accompany as much drive and determination any individual could muster.

As a boy, Paul found his escape in athletics, working out as a runner and testing his mettle in the open spaces near his home. He became a star competitor and enjoyed the advantage of traveling throughout the nation after being given opportunities to compete. Along the way, he saw more of the country than most people do in a lifetime. "I was lucky to be able to travel for competitions all over the U.S. and to see places I once could only dream of," he recalls. "The Olympic Stadium in Los Angeles, the endless plains of Texas, the Kansas prairie, the Rocky Mountain in Wyoming. Every trip was funded by a hat the town passed around on my behalf, and it never came back empty." When Paul finished second in a nationwide track competition, he was met at the airport by the high school marching band and a fire engine with spinning lights that drove him in triumph through town. In an expression of hometown pride, the mayor handed him the key to the city.

No one ever told Paul he had to follow in his family's tradition. He was a dreamer after all, and he had seen enough of America to know there was more out there than his little town could ever offer. Consequently, his ambitions were never destined to stay bottled up for long. He would write, paint, play trumpet and sing in the school choir. "I never had anyone tell me I had to be a farmer," Paul insists. "I had plenty of people telling me how my hard work and talent could take me places. That's enough to get you dreaming, And enough to make you believe those dreams are within reach."

Indeed, Paul found those dreams were within his reach, at least in terms of his imagination. However, their pursuit would take him far from home. His first destination was Boston College, courtesy of a track scholarship. Yet as Paul describes it, his athletic endeavors, combined with his academic responsibilities, served to rob him of his creativity. It was only after he suffered a knee injury which forced him to take a year off that he rebounded with a new form of expression, made possible when his girlfriend's sister gave him a secondhand guitar. "A mysterious, lustful partnership with the instrument followed," Paul concedes. "It became a marriage, a friendship, a lifelong bond that only comes when you find that one thing that becomes an extension of yourself. I played for hours, choosing to write my own original songs and sing instead of studying, socializing or exploring what the Boston streets could offer after hours."

After graduation, Paul did find time to explore those paths, while taking opportunities to indulge his creative ambitions. Working as a teacher and social worker with inner-city children by day and pursuing the possibilities offered by Boston's fertile music scene at night, he gained prominence in local coffeehouses and open mic nights. It was the same circuit that opened the door for other like-minded artists of the day, and in turn, gave Paul exposure to such creative contemporaries as Shawn Colvin, Dar Williams, Patty Larkin, John Gorka, Catie Curtis, and Bill Morrissey. It also helped him win a Boston Underground Songwriting competition and placement on a Windham Hill Records singer/songwriter compilation, bringing him his first hint of national exposure at the same time.

The major tipping point in his career came with the opportunity to open for Bill Morrissey, one of New England's most prominent folk artists. Paul would repeatedly ask Morrissey about his own influences and seek his advice on who he ought to listen to. "You know, that's a very smart thing to do," Morrissey muses. "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."

It was mutual admiration that caused Paul to ask Morrissey to produce his first full album, 1993's *Say Something*. It was released on Black Wolf Records, the label he founded with Ralph Jaccodine, the man who would become his manager. "Ralph was fulfilling a dream to get into the music business," Paul recalls. "Starting with a folk singer isn't a rocket launch, but we got off the ground. We started a label and began a lifelong, DIY partnership and have been in the trenches for over 20 years."

Paul also became infatuated with the music of Woody Guthrie, drawn to Woody's social consciousness and the humanitarian streak that ran through his work. He even had a tattoo of Guthrie imprinted on his right shoulder, referring to it as "a badge of who he was." His commitment to Guthrie's legacy eventually led to his inclusion in a ten-day celebration of Woody's work held at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in September 1996, an event that included such notables as Bruce Springsteen, Billy Bragg, the Indigo Girls and Ani DiFranco and which was presided over by Guthrie's daughter Nora. Later, when Guthrie's hometown of Okemah, Oklahoma hosted the first Woody Guthrie Folk Festival in July 1998, Paul was tapped as one of the headliners. He has since made this an annual part of his touring schedule, garnering the honor of being named an honorary citizen of Okemah in the process. The connection with Guthrie continued into the new millennium when Nora Guthrie invited him to put music to a set of her father's lyrics. He later participated in the "Ribbon of Highway" tour, a communal salute featuring such luminaries as Arlo Guthrie, Marty Stuart, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Nanci Griffith, Guy Clark, and Janis Ian, among others.

There's likely no greater evidence of how Guthrie's insights and humanity have rubbed off on Paul than in this particularly telling tribute from Nora Guthrie. "A singer-songwriter is only as good as the times he reflects," she said in praising Paul. "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'!"

Where Paul is "goin'" is to practically every place a microphone beckons and a crowd of the folk faithful awaits. He's become a staple at the Newport Folk Festival, played Carnegie Hall, and venues from Alaska to Miami, Paris, and London. In addition to his 19 albums released on the Rounder and Black Wolf record labels, his music has appeared on dozens of distinguished compilations. A Film/ DVD entitled 3000 Miles -- part concert film, part documentary, part instructional video -- provides a further perspective on both the man and his music. He's also released a pair of children's albums, earning him honors from the Parent's Choice Foundation for both. His latest, "The Hero In You" has been turned into a picture book, detailing the lives of great American heroes. Ellis' literate, evocative and insightful writings are further showcased in a book of poetry and short stories entitled "Notes from the Road," already in its third pressing.

It's no wonder then that recently Paul received a prestigious honor: an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from the University of Maine, which also asked him to write the school's alma mater as well as deliver its commencement address in May 2014.

Happily, his music has been shared with a wider audience as well, through commercials, documentaries, TV shows and in the soundtracks of several blockbuster films, among them three by the Farrelly Brothers -- "Hall Pass" (starring Owen Wilson and Alyssa Milano), "Me, Myself, & Irene" (starring Jim Carrey) and "Shallow Hal" (starring Jack Black and Gwyneth Paltrow). Peter Farrelly summed up the sentiments of all those who have come to know and appreciate Paul's music by referring to him as "a national treasure."

Not surprisingly, Paul's consistently been heralded by others as well. One writer noted, "that it reminds you how much we need storytellers back in pop music -- storytellers with empathy, fine eyes and an understanding that even though we live in a soulless, indifferent world, our music doesn't have to reflect our culture." Another reviewer was even more pointed. "Ellis Paul is one of the best singer/songwriters of his generation," she commented. "And for many of us he is the face of contemporary folk music. Few are as smart, as literate, as poetic as Paul. I cannot think of another artist on the acoustic music scene is better loved by fans, or more respected by his contemporaries."

Indeed, he is all that, and in a very real sense, even more. He's an observer, a philosopher, and an astute storyteller who shares with his listeners the life lessons he's learned, and in turn, life lessons they ought to heed as well. By affirming and defining who he is, Ellis Paul affirms and uncovers the essence of us all.

-- Lee Zimmerman (writer/reviewer for American Songwriter, No Depression, New Times, Country Standard Time, Blurt, Relix, and M Music and Musicians )