

In the darkness it takes time for your eyes to adjust. Then you look for a way out.

That's what Ellis Paul was thinking as the calendar flipped another page and he was looking at 50 knowing he had to make some serious changes. A difficult marriage, a career that was feeling stagnant, and a voice that was feeling the wear of thirty years of hard road time. Both of his hands were slowly closing in on themselves with a disease called Dupuytren's Syndrome that folds the fingers shut and was limiting his ability to make the the piano talk, the guitar sing.

Sometimes you gotta tear the whole damn house down. Find wood. Start over.

It took time. A few years. He left a marriage that had weighed down his forties, his label, his management company, booking agency — all of it — he set them free. Then he set out to prove that he could do this on his own terms, step by step, song by song, with a new set of carpenters. The Storyteller's Suitcase is Ellis's first record in five years, and it shows someone who is at the very height of their craft, both as a producer and songwriter.

Ellis built his own music's story by being a prolific road machine over the last thirty years. Over five thousand shows. His songs have always been regarded as lyrically crafted stories that could somehow manage to shed light on your own. He was born into a potato farming family in northern Maine. Got to college in Boston on a track scholarship and then hit the thriving Boston folk music scene after graduation. He was seeing the world with the eyes of a small-town farm kid. He eventually started rolling out from Boston doing the national club circuit, town by town. Along the way, he landed some major soundtracks, won fifteen Boston Music Awards, and had a few country artists cut his songs. He recorded nineteen albums, many for Rounder Records. The highway brought the kind of dedicated following normally reserved for radio stars. For this album, a thousand people would give him over \$100,000 to bring "The Storyteller's Suitcase" to life. He started his own label, Rosella Records, named for his two young daughters. He also made a vow on this recording just to write about the stuff that was important to him, at a time in our history when these stories have to be told. Songs that had to be written regardless of the consequences. He wasn't chasing after a hook or a line for commercial purposes or to land a soundtrack. He was writing to start over and find his own footing. Songs about love, family, and then outwardly about community, our country, and how our collective values are currently misplaced.

Paul opens the album with the graceful and dream-like "I Ain't No Jesus," which brims with the sound of gentle fiddles and acoustic guitar. Originally, Paul, in a nod to John Prine, imagined "Jesus coming out of his tomb at Easter and looking around at how screwed up everything is. So he says, 'Fuck it, I'm going back in.' It was serious, with a humorous aspect to it." But while writing with rising country star Jamie Kent, the track morphed into a love song, much to Paul's surprise and delight. "I'm hoping it will end up crashing as a surprise guest at a few wedding ceremonies," he says. "You'll Never Be This Young Again" is a wistful soul-soother that glides along on Brian Caputo's freewheeling drum groove; interestingly, the song was born out of a moment of deep frustration when backing vocalist Laurie MacAllister, obsessing over finishing her own solo record, said, "I've gotta get this done! I'll never be this young again!" The line hit Paul like a thunderbolt, and all at once he began forming a mission statement with wondrous lines like "You only get so many heartbeats." "It's magic when that happens," he says. "You start with a title and the song just writes itself."

As the album unfolds, more treasures reveal themselves. To the sound of Ryan Hommel's sweeping pedal steel guitar, Paul takes listeners on the road with him on "Kiss Me 'Cause I'm Gone." "The song is like snapshots of my life on the highway," he says. "Sometimes getting to a better place means driving there." Paul also documents his travels on the radiantly romantic title track. He came up with the concept of "a storyteller's suitcase" as a catch-all, one which sparked the song but also conveyed the very essence of the album. "It's adventure, the audience, and the loves you discover along the way," says Paul. "My favorite line on the album resides here: 'A song is just a skeleton key that can open any palace door.'"

Responding to the notion that you can't go home again, Paul revisits a family reunion in his beloved Maine on the vivid "Five Alarm Fire on the 4th of July," a track that's as rich with musical textures as it is with autobiographical details. He basks in another one of his great loves – baseball – on the feel-good gem "How You Say Goodbye." The song was written by Kyle Hanacharik, one of many songwriters Ellis has mentored over the years. Paul met Hanacharik at one of the songwriters' retreat he hosts and was knocked out by his natural talents. "Kyle has me at the line 'swing of a bat,'" he says.

"Scarecrow in a Corn Maze" is a movie-like story song that swings with the vibe of The Band off "The Big Pink." It tells the tale of a wounded soldier, Colby James, who returns to Oklahoma from Iraq with a case of PTSD and a penchant for robbing grocery stores. He swings the tale as an indictment of how we care for our natural resources (oil, wind, crops), versus how we care for the resource of human beings.

With "The Innocence and the Afterlife," Paul recounts the death of his father and how he explained the meaning of eternal life to his young daughter. "It was my first profound conversation with her. She was five," he recalls. "By the end of it, we were both crying, but it was beautiful, sad, profound." With aching poignancy, he addresses similar subject matter on "Heaven," written for a friend, Kevin Fleming, whose brother Scott had just died. Paul interviewed members of the Fleming family to get an accurate portrait of Scott – "who he was, what he believed in, what he loved. It was daunting to take on something so sensitive, but the song proved to be a universal goodbye."

An intrinsic part of Paul's magic is how he blends personal reflections with social commentary, as he does on the harrowing "The Battle of Charlottesville." For Paul, the tragic events of August 12, 2017, hit home in a significant way as he's lived in the Virginia city for the past 14 years. "We moved here after the birth of my first daughter, and it's always been a wonderful place," he says. "I was on the road when Heather Heyer was killed and the police helicopter crashed. I came back to the ashes of it all. The whole thing was so shocking and disturbing, so I felt compelled to write about it. Three people dead over what? A fucking statue."

On the bracing album closer, "Election Day," Paul covers a song written by Michael K. Brown that sums up much of the nation's mood about the current administration. "It's all there – the billionaires, the NRA, big oil," Paul says. "Michael sang it for me, and I asked him to play it over and over. I said, 'That sounds like something Woody Guthrie would have written if he were here.'"

"To me, the record evokes the spirit of albums I love from the '60s, '70s and '80s," he says. "There's an intimacy to certain records by artists like Cat Stevens and James Taylor – the music is both sparse yet as full as it needs to be, and that's something I wanted to capture."

His voice has rebounded. It rings as clear as the liberty bell. His hands, however, curl in as if they're pulling invisible sheets from a king sized bed. "I've got options left still with them. Surgery. Injections," he says, "But I've heard so many nightmares from people who've gone through it. I can't risk losing another year to my hands. And fortunately, they're curling in the right direction."

Beyond its obvious compositional treasures, *The Storyteller's Suitcase* represents a sonic triumph for Paul in his first solo run as a producer. Relying on a small coterie of musicians who sprinkle the songs with tasteful additions of Hammond B3, 12-string electrics, harp, mandolin and fiddles, Paul layers the instruments around the core foundation of his acoustic guitar and voice in a way that opens the songs up to their fullest potential without overwhelming their thoughtful arrangements.