



Ellis Paul “**Essentials**” Rounder/Philo Records

In a recording career spanning some eighteen years, “**Essentials**” apart, Ellis Paul has released a dozen albums. Within the foregoing total are two live recordings, the most recent being the limited edition “**Live At Club Passim, New Years Eve 2005**,” plus there was that early 21st century collection of cover songs compiled with his musical partner in crime, Vance Gilbert. In the process of releasing those albums Ellis Paul has placed a tad over one hundred of his own compositions in the public domain. “**Essentials**,” a 2CD career retrospective, features thirty-one of the latter, albeit that two are previously unheard, plus there’s one cover song, fittingly, Mark Erelli’s “The Only Way.” When Erelli first burst on the scene in the late nineteen-nineties he was compared to Paul, but via a handful of stunning solo releases, Mark has proved he is a totally unique contributor to the contemporary folk process. Paul’s cover of “The Only Way” – it’s the most intelligent post 9/11 assessment of how to move forward that I’ve heard – appeared on “**Side Of The Road**,” the Ellis/Vance collaboration. It’s also a truly inspired selection.

When it comes to selecting ones best work, some fans are obviously going to be disappointed because their personal favourite didn’t make the cut. In my case, that would have been “King Of 7th Avenue” from “**Stories**” [1994]. The latter is the album that launched my journey with Ellis [one that’s still ‘on track’], and to me “King Of 7th Avenue” remains one heck of a powerful creation. Like an ‘old photograph’ – a rather familiar one appears on the rear of the CD booklet, and a handful more feature on the inside of the rear tray card – Philo Records has cast the liner artwork in shades of sepia. I guess sepia is the colour of history, and that’s the principle thrust of “**Essentials**.” Furthermore that [plural] word was undoubtedly ‘the pick’ for this collection title, since it possesses a certain sonic synergy with ‘Ellis.’

So where do we begin? Seventeen tracks in length, on Disc 1 one cut is a spoken introduction, “**Essentials**” is launched by the melodically easy going swagger of “Take Me Down,” a tale of travel and parting, it first appeared on the Jerry Marotta produced “**Translucent Soul**” [1998] and later on “**Live**” [2000]. Based on a real life event that occurred in Paul’s hometown in Maine [although not involving him personally], “Eighteen” is a tale of coming of age – and comes complete with an ‘oh so eloquent’ Duke Levine mandola solo. The decade old “Paris In A Day” amounts to a whirlwind city travelogue. Ellis is supported on the latter by the voice of the divine Patty Griffin who, somehow, manages to sound remarkably like Kate Rusby. Disc 1 includes new interpretations of five songs that appeared on Paul’s most recent solo studio outings, chronologically, “**The Speed Of Trees**” [2002] and “**American Jukebox Favourites**” [2005]. Taken from the latter, “Home” is the first ‘revision.’ Subjectively inspired by a house in Maine that Paul bought, loved dearly, and then had to sell, he found solace in the unavoidable parting by burning the property down in the lyrics of a song. The other ‘studio revisions’ are the love affair conducted at arm’s length - “Maria’s Beautiful Mess,” and the [later] segue of “If You Break Down” and “Words,” all from “**The Speed Of Trees**.” Produced by John Jennings, these new interpretations feature J.T. Brown [bass], Dave Mattacks [drums], Don Conoscenti [guitar] and Ellis. In addition, Jennings played electric guitar, keyboards and piano. I stated earlier that there were five new versions, and Disc 1 closes with a ‘bare bones’ April 2006 reading of “Jukebox On My Grave” recorded in Ellis’ Virginia kitchen. “If She’s The One,” a new song that takes the seeking and finding of love as its theme, was co-

written with Flynn, producer of **"American Jukebox Favourites."** Other highlights on Disc 1 include the superbly surreal "Angel In Manhattan," Y2K's live version of "Did Galileo Pray?" and the 'almost new' "Snow In Austin" which made its debut on **"Live At Club Passim, New Years Eve 2005."** And finally let's give special mention to "Conversation With A Ghost." The version here, c/w a Patty Griffin backing vocal, is a heartfelt tribute to a close friend who passed many years ago, and this song rightfully brought the Mainer to the attention of Boston's folk audiences,

Disc 2 also features a spoken intro and it prefaces the closing cut "God's Promise," an edited Guthrie lyric for which Ellis composed the tune. The second disc begins with "Sweet Mistakes," the title track of the Y2K album Paul recorded in Decatur, Georgia with producers Kristian Bush and Don McCallister. Next up is his best known road song "3000 Miles," it remains a firm fan favourite and first appeared on **"Stories"** [1994], later on **"Live"** [2000] but it's the remixed **"Sweet Mistakes"** version that appears here. The road and locations they have taken Ellis to, appear again in the lyrics of "Blacktop Trains," "Midnight Strikes Too Soon" [NYC] and "Alice's Champagne Palace" [Homer, Alaska]. "Autobiography Of A Pistol" succinctly delivers its message in the line *"You see guns don't kill people, it's the bullets that do,"* while "The Martyr's Lounge" imagines a bar in heaven peopled by dead rock stars and other celebrities, some of whom didn't die from natural causes. A deliberately perverse scenario it raises the question, why are some of them there? In "All Things Being The Same," taken from the Duke Levine produced **"Stories,"** the principle character is a Decatur barfly, so Paul grabbed the opportunity to mention Eddie's Attic which is located in the city, and according to the musician is *"one of my favourite clubs in America."* The new song on Disc 2 is the John Jennings produced, "Welcome Home To Maine." Ellis was commissioned by the Governor's office to write the song about the state of his birth, and was happy to do so. Far from being averse to tackling controversial subjects in "She Loves A Girl" Paul paints a portrait of a family who disown their daughter because of her sexual preference. The Mainer rarely co-writes songs, but Slaid Cleaves and Jeff Plankenhorn were his collaborators on "She Was," written in the Texas Hill Country on the 120 odd mile journey from the Quiet Valley Ranch on Highway 16 to Austin, Texas. Originally a track on **"American Jukebox Favourites"** the version featured here was recorded at Boston's Somerville Theatre during April 2006. In the penultimate song "The Speed Of Trees," the lyric focuses [poetically speaking] on relationships and faithfulness and was the title cut of his 2002 album of the same name. Like the closing cut "God's Promise," "The Speed Of Trees" was recorded during a January 2006 concert in Paul's beloved Maine. The venue was, Boothbay's Opera House.

If you've never visited 'musically' with Mr. Ellis Paul, **"Essentials"** is a stunning place to start. And I retain no doubts whatsoever that you'll rather quickly be totally hooked. As for his long-time supporters there's enough 'new material' on **"Essentials"** to makes it more than just another tired old "Best Of....."

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

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