



## Eliza Gilkyson “**Land Of Milk And Honey**” Red House Records

With the first [“Hiway 9”] and final [“Peace Call”] chords on this collection Eliza draws a *decisive and politically aware* line in the sand. Relative to the opening cut “Hiway 9” think Iraq, and then go figure that Gilkyson won’t be on the invitation list to George W’s impending *end of term* soiree at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. What’s that old chestnut, *the pen is mightier than the sword*? That being the case, where the Eliza of old would have been off exploring the spiritually mythical and the mystic, on this new recording with intended *irony* she dubs her homeland, *a modern day land of milk and honey*, and then sets about lambasting it’s leaders for their warmongering abroad and their incompetent management [and self-serving interest] at home. If there are any myths explored by Gilkyson on this album it’s that these days great store is placed by the powerbrokers in *“making lies sound like the truth.”*

Relative to the aforementioned warmongering in “Hiway 9,” Gilkyson pinpoints the culprit in the opening lines with *“Well the white god said to the little man, We’re gonna fulfil scripture in the holy land”* and closes the first verse with *“Go on and liberate my people and their o-i-l.”* Holding nothing back, subsequent verses talk of *“a devil of our own design,” “chickenhawks,” “neo-cons,” “daddy’s kin”* while in order to perpetuate the myth of WMD and such *“they had their own clear channel and a hell of a spin.”* As for Iraq, it was time to *“pulverize the puppet it’s payback time,”* but then the final price [to pay] has yet to be assessed, since *“now we’re standing toe to toe with what we feared the most, that old father and his son and the unholy host.”* A venomously worded construction, supported by a restrained blues shuffle, in the closing verse Eliza motivates the listener to redress the balance and *“run to the polls when it comes the time.”*

The punch line in “Not Lonely” is that the narrator is a *“one-man woman”* and that *“I’m alone, not lonely.”* Might just be autobiographical, which is no great surprise with Eliza. Co-written with her sister Nancy, “Dark Side Of Town” is a tribute to the late Al Ragle who *“put down the bottle October ’89”* and *“settled down along the banks of Onion Creek”* in Austin, and sadly passed in the summer of 2003. “Tender Mercies,” a prayer for some sanity in this crazy, screwed-up, early 21<sup>st</sup> century world, opens *“Across the world she tapes explosives to her chest, Steps into a shopping mall,”* and goes on to make the point *“A life devoid of all of mercy’s tenderness, Really isn’t a life at all.”* The second verse talks of children who will ultimately perish after *“swimming in a poison pool,”* and was inspired by the album cover picture, which I’ll return to later, while the closing verse envisions [and even prays for] a place where everybody is *“safe and warm among the truly blessed.”*

Gilkyson delivers her statement of intent in the *modern relationship* song “Wonderland” with *“I don’t need promises or happily ever after maybe, I just want your sweet kisses baby.”* And in the closing lines of the penultimate verse adds, *“But things are never what they seem, In the land of milk and honey.”* Subjectively, “Separated” reprises the angst and heartbreak that lyrically informed much of her Red House debut **“Hard Times In Babylon.”** “Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson” was co-written with the woman whose desperately sad *real life* story unfolds in the lyric. Born with a cleft plate and of Cree blood, at an early age, Johnson endures sibling and parental incest, eventually marries, has kids of her own, but is eventually incarcerated for murdering a man who was going to kidnap her offspring. In the closing verse, Medicine Bear Woman, aged 35, claims redemption while expressing great regret for her actions. A fiddle, guitar and drums led hoedown “Runnin’ Away,” was penned by Eliza’s dad, the late Terry Gilkyson.

"*Oh what fools these mortals be,*" the opening line of the [almost] album title track "Milk And Honey" paraphrases the words of Puck in Shakespeare's "**Midsummer Night's Dream.**" It's the second Shakespearean link on this ten-song set, as the lyric of "Separated" name checks Ophelia. In three verses, the melodically hymn like "Milk And Honey" paints a bleak portrait of the industrialised world and then focuses upon those people who dream of travelling to one of those countries in the hope of finding a land of plenty. "Peace Call," the closing track, penned by Woody Guthrie around 1951/1953, and never previously recorded, features the combined voices of Gilkyson, her near neighbour in Austin, Patty Griffin, plus Iris DeMent and Mary Chapin Carpenter. It's based around the repeated chorus "*Peace, peace, peace, I can hear the bugle sounding, roaming around my land my city and my town, Peace, peace, peace, I can hear the voices ringing, louder while my bugle calls for peace.*" Each of the forgoing quartet of vocalists takes a solo as this inspirational prayer for peace unfolds.

I'd contend that, apart from the front cover shot that I'll return to in a moment, most of the liner booklet pictures were inspired by Gilkyson's role in the Woody Guthrie song tribute tour "Ribbon Of Highway, Endless Skyway" which she participated in during 2003. The United States is principally composed of people who arrived there, literally, from every corner of the world. By nature a nomadic people, the booklet is littered with pictures of vehicles overloaded with possessions going someplace else, or of vast tracts of wilderness with no discernable horizon. As for the aforementioned cover shot a young man in swimming trunks is pictured diving into a waste plant cesspool. It was actually taken on the North Albania/Kosovo border in 1992, but is symptomatic of the underbelly of industrialised societies. While we strive to create a *land of milk and honey*, industrial processes sadly dictate that we also create dangerous toxic waste that can kill as lethally as a soldier's bullet.

Produced by Mark Hallman and cut at his South Austin hideaway, Congress House Studios, apart from the aforementioned vocalists, the support players on "**Land Of Milk And Honey**" include Slaid Cleaves, Eliza's son Cisco Ryder, her daughter Delia, sister Nancy, Jon Dee Graham, Stephen Bruton and Rich Brotherton. As for the overall verdict, frankly, this may be the finest set of songs that Eliza has yet created/recorded.

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood  
Kerrville Kronikles 02/04