

## Mark Erelli – The “Hillbilly Pilgrim” Interview

### Part 2 – Mark talks about the songs on the “Hillbilly Pilgrim” album

*In last week’s episode Mark talked about recording the “Hillbilly Pilgrim” album. This week we begin talking about the songs he wrote for the album.....*

**Folkwax :** Western swing being the style of music that it is, an up-tempo number is a good place to start. Was “Brand New Baby” the obvious choice.

**Mark Erelli :** It was a deliberate choice once we saw how fast the arrangement gelled. That was the first song we tackled when rehearsing and the arrangement fell together immediately. It was a nice mid-tempo song, I would say, to start the album off. It eases you in a little more than if we had started with “Troubadour Blues” say, which kind of comes smokin’ right out of the gate. It’s a fun tune and the arrangement kind of heralds everything that you are going to hear later on.

**FW :** “Troubadour Blues” was a monthly MP3 download on your web site early in 2003. It’s a song about travelling songsmiths as the lines *“All you need is a simple song, Three chords and the truth”* relate. Tell us about writing it.

**ME :** That song really grew out of me getting out on the road a little bit more, and touring mostly by myself. I ended up in Nashville last winter at the Folk Alliance Conference. They had this wonderful tribute to Woody Guthrie there.

**FW :** You mean “Ribbon Of Highway.”

**ME :** Exactly. It was an expanded line-up relative to the touring line-up, and I caught the second half of the show. I was really struck by all the things that people were singing about. The songs could have been written yesterday. I thought – and this is, in some respects, not a good thing – they were talking about social inequality and war and fascism.

**FW :** And some seventy years later, the story hasn’t changed.

**ME :** Yeah. We still have inequality, the poor and the homelessness. I thought, *“God, this is depressing.”* It kind of hit me that this is exactly what I’m doing now. I’m singing about some of those things. Those were some of the social issues I was writing about in those more serious songs I talked about earlier. There’s that line in the song *“Nothing has really changed since Woody Guthrie’s time.”* It really pissed me off you know and I thought, *“What am I going to do about this?”* I realised that I’m trying to join this chain of troubadours that have always called attention to these things in our society, and the fact that it’s not right, and it could be better. We can be better and do better. That’s what led me to start the song talking about, how I got into playing music and then the people that allow me to keep doing music and support me while I’m doing my music. It led to that final couple of verses - frustration with why nothing is happening, plus my frustration with the current quote/unquote *administration*.

**FW :** Early in the song, the chorus name checks Townes, Hank Sr., Jimmie Rodgers and Woody Guthrie. Near the end of the song you add Dave Carter.

**ME :** What can I say, that’s a line for people that are both already in the know and are -

**FW :** Listening.

**ME :** Yeah, and hopefully people will recognise all those other names, and if they don’t know Dave Carter’s name they’ll go *“Well who was Dave Carter?”*

**FW :** Exactly.

**ME :** Why am I mentioning him in the same breath as Townes and Jimmie Rodgers? Maybe it will bring a few more people to his music that may not have found it otherwise. That’s my tribute to Dave. We were good friends and he was obviously singing about the same things that Woody Guthrie was singing about,

and did it so well. He is in the song for obvious reasons. I would have put Johnny Cash in there, except he hadn't passed away when I recorded the song.

**FW** : Do you think Signature should send a copy of "**Hillbilly Pilgrim**" to the White House.

**ME** : [Laughs]. They should send it to Howard Dean, is what I think [Laughs]. I'm sure that President Bush thinks he's doing the right thing. I'm deeply disappointed in what he's done. I think the only thing I've agreed with, is that he supported a national Do Not Call list for telemarketers. Everything else, I think he's gone about his domestic and foreign policy in a horribly misguided and arrogant way. I hope the situation changes in November. What else can I say I'm not a fan. And I don't expect he's a fan of mine either [Laughs].

**FW** : The next song up is "A Bend In The River." My take is that it's another Mark Erelli small town America song in the mould of "River Road."

**ME** : It's an update of that. Yeah.

**FW** : The song does however focus on very specific things. You describe the main character as "*without a rambling bone*" while the crucial quote is "*you stay in one place long enough and it starts to feel like home.*" There's a hint in the lyric that the narrator feels he's losing out on life by staying in a small town, but ultimately he decides to stay.

**ME** : When I travel around, I see a lot of small towns. If you were on your way to a ski area, you might drive through these small New England towns. I know that people who live in urban liberal areas, think to themselves, "*My God, why would anybody live here?*" or "*What do people do here?*" I've had those same thoughts. The more of those kind of places that I play in, and meet people, I realise that these places are people's homes. Not everybody gets the chance to make something of their lives. That's kind of a privilege in this country. I've seen towns like that, for instance, in Western Massachusetts. There are towns, particularly along Route 2, that inspired this song. There's this river that runs along beside these towns, and you blink and the town is gone. I always wondered, "*What do people do here? Could I live here ? What would I do?*" I kind of coupled that with the homogenisation of small town America with WAL-MART.

**FW** : In the lyric you took a poke at corporate America, but didn't specify any brand name.

**ME** : Well, WAL-MART's corporate slogan is "*We sell for less.*" So that's my comment about the store on the edge of town, selling for less.

**FW** : And they probably pay their workers less. So every aspect of the deal is pernicious.

**ME** : They're a double edged sword those WAL-MART stores, you know. They provide a place for people that don't have a lot of money to shop and get the things they need. But, so many other things are sacrificed in order for a store like WAL-MART to come in. I sometimes wonder if there is not a better way. I don't know what that is. Sadly, the result is, it makes every piece of America look like every other piece of America. That's what that last verse is about. Someday we'll maybe be able to wipe this all away and start over again and get it right. Like I say in the song, "*The mill takes all its work south,*" and it leaves the town to figure out "*OK, if we're not a mill town, what are we now?*" A lot of those towns never figure that out. Once the mill leaves, that's when WAL-MART comes in and sets up on the edge of town. The next thing you know, instead of going down Main Street to five or six different stores to do your errands, you can go to your Super WAL-MART and do your food shopping, your clothes shopping and pharmacy right under one roof. It's no mystery why it happens. The best line I can think of in reference to this phenomenon is in Greg Brown's "The Poet Game" where he says "*If we could do all this in thirty years, then please tell me you all - why does good change take so long?*" He's talking about watching his country turn into a coast-to-coast strip mall. Not to be too bleak about it, but it feels that way a lot of the time.

**FW** : Country music albums are a great place to find boy/girl duets.

**ME** : They sure are.

**FW** : So we get to your song “Pretend.”

**ME** : That song was not originally intended as a duet, but I was looking for a place to specifically involve my friend Erin McKeown, because she is so good at swing flavoured things. We realised that we could trade off some lines in “Pretend,” and it seemed like a perfect opportunity and right up her alley. I’m very honoured that she was able to find time to be on the record.

**FW** : Shall I give you my take on “The Farewell Ball.”

**ME** : Go for it.

**FW** : If I’ve commented that “A Bend In The River” portrays a town that is on its uppers, then “The Farewell Ball” – which actually has quite a cheerful, upbeat melody – is *the wake* for a dispensable small town, because the government has decided that it’s going to build a dam and flood the area.

**ME** : OK, here’s the historical background. The Quabbin Reservoir is located in the western half of Central Massachusetts, between Northampton and Worcester. It’s about one hundred miles west of Boston. In the early 1900’s Boston was expanding, outgrew its water sources, so they needed a new large reservoir to draw from. They found the Swift river valley out in Western Massachusetts, and there were four towns there. Small communities with a heavy summer component, more like vacation spots, but there were also definitely year round residents. They took all the property by *eminent domain*, cut down the trees, moved houses and dug up the graves. Basically flooded this whole four-town portion of the state to make this gigantic reservoir. It began, I think, in 1936 and was a big public works project. Interestingly enough, Catie Curtis, the singer/songwriter - her grandfather designed the Winsor Dam. Her grandfather was a Winsor. As far as the song goes, this town Enfield, was the last town to remain incorporated. The firemen, every year, would hold the fireman’s gala in Enfield town hall and people would come and dance and socialise. They held it one more time, and everybody came from miles around to go to what they called, *the farewell ball*. At midnight, literally, the band did play “Auld Lang Syne” and the town’s charter expired. Probably a month or two later the water started to rise behind the dam and everybody left.

**FW** : I took it that the government had bought them out, but in the lyric you have the hall decked out in red, white and blue. I found that quite ironic, but I presume that was deliberate on your part.

**ME** : I really didn’t make up anything in the song, other than the last couple of verses. Even some of that stuff was taken from memories handed down by surviving natives of the town. That whole thing about red, white and blue, they used to dress the hall up in patriotic bunting to foster civic pride. They did, in actuality, have some black in the decorations for that year. It wasn’t all red, white and blue, but I couldn’t find a way to make that work into the rhyme.

**FW** : Well maybe I’m placing the flag in a position where it equals the government, but here was something national destroying something very local, and yet they were still supporting it.

**ME** : It wasn’t a national government project it was a state of Massachusetts project. In the pictures, from what I’ve seen, they almost look like July 4th decorations. It’s amazing to look at the pictures, after the fact, while listening to the song. It was a hard song to write and I’d wanted to write it for a while. In fact I wanted to write it for the “**Memorial Hall**” record, because it was a song about that area, but I didn’t have the wherewithal to write a historic song. In the last couple of years, I’ve gotten over that hump a few times and been able to write these very historically minded songs. This song was the first success I had in that area.

**FW** : Surely the most telling line and image in “The Farewell Ball” is “*families and neighbours scattered like papers.*”

**ME** : They moved them to different towns in the surrounding area and, like I said, dug up the graves and moved them to a brand new cemetery. Except for the Native American graves. The Native American’s are still at the bottom of this reservoir, which is kind of an interesting aside. That line was part of a different verse I had written. That verse in the song now, is the second or third draft. The original verse

was something to the effect of how you can't go home again, that old cliché. In this case I thought the cliché was justified because, you know, they really couldn't go home again.

*To be continued.*

Arthur Wood  
Kerrville Kronikles 01/04  
[2250 words]

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### **Part 3 – Mark talks some more about the songs on the “Hillbilly Pilgrim” album**

*In last week's episode Mark began talking about the songs on the “Hillbilly Pilgrim” album, and we begin this week with “Let Make A Family.”*

**Folkwax** : In the liner booklet, there's a comments about “Let's Make A Family,” to the extent *any resemblance to real person living or dead is purely coincidental*. So it's a little bit of crystal ball gazing.

**Mark Erelli** : [Laughs]. I put that in there for my parents, so they wouldn't think that Polly and I were expecting [Laughs].

**FW** : In terms of a western swing lyric, this song is filled with humour. And not only that, it's self-deprecating humour.

**ME** : Oh sure.

**FW** : For instance there's humour in the lines, *“though the money we got ain't goin' far, you can't make a lot with an acoustic guitar.”*

**ME** : Yeah, that's pretty specific to me I would say. Obviously western swing has a huge history with self-deprecating humour. Hank Thompson is one of the best exponents, and he has been a real big find for me in this project. I'd heard of a lot of Hank's in country music, but I'd never heard of Hank Thompson. He's like my favourite western swing guy now. He has written a lot of really clever funny songs with a lot of tongue in cheek things, and that one is really my tribute to him.

**FW** : Towards the end of the song, is there some sort of subliminal suggestion going on in, *“all it would take is just a couple of set of twins and before too long I'd have me a band for free.”*

**ME** : I was trying to find a funny way to end it. I'd seen Stacey Earle in the past, and her husband played guitar and her son played drums, and I thought, *“God, she's got a whole band right there in her family.”* Then I thought, *“Wait a minute, we can use that in this song.”*

**FW** : It would be so neat if somebody listened to, “Let's Make A Family” and then heard say “The Farewell Ball.” They're going to learn a lot.

**ME** : Oh yeah. There's a lot of stuff going on in these songs you know. People aren't expecting grand philosophical revelations from western swing, that being said, you can get away with saying a lot that might sound polemic or overly didactic in another musical genre. The verse about Bush in “Troubadour Blues” I sneaked in at the end of what was a really fun, up-tempo driving song. You think you know where it's goin' and then I throw this dig in there. A lot of people, it takes them a while to catch it. I think that's the kind of beauty of western swing, I can say things that are more personal – whether it's jokingly personal like “Brand New Baby” or “Let's Make A Family.” Or personal as far as my political beliefs are concerned in “Troubadour Blues.” Maybe it's the singer/songwriter in me that can't resist doing that. I think it enriches the songs for people that want to listen a little deeper. There's stuff there that folks can grab on to, but if they just want to put it on and dance, they can do that too.

**FW** : Where did you find the Clarence Gibson cover, “Troubles (Those Lonesome Kind).”

**ME :** Loren found that one actually, on a Rhino Records country music compilation **“Legends Of Western Swing.”** It’s by Billy Jack Wills who is actually Bob Wills younger brother. I still don’t know who Clarence Gibson is. I called up the Country Music Hall of Fame, had them do a search and they found nothing. Billy Jack, on the other hand, is a very interesting character. He played in Bob’s band and then had a band on his own in the fifties. Our version is very faithful to theirs, notwithstanding the solos. We thought that triple harmony part on the chorus was fantastic. We wanted something that was a little more rock’n’roll. Something that really uncorked everybody.

**FW :** “My Best Was Just Not Good Enough” and “Fool No. 1” are next - my presumption is that you probably wrote those songs around the same time.

**ME :** I know that both of them were written before **“Compass & Companion”** because we recorded “My Best Was Just Not Good Enough” for that album, and never finished it. It didn’t seem to be happening, we already had enough material, so we let it go. Those have been around, I would say, since at least about 1999, maybe early 2000. When I wrote those songs, I remembering thinking that “Fool No. 1” was straight out of listening to Hank Williams. At the time I was on a Hank Williams binge. “My Best Wasn’t Good Enough (For You)” was directly out of a Willie Nelson binge. The title takes a cue from Willie’s song “I’ve Just Destroyed The World I’m Livin’ In” which is one of my favourite country song titles. When we tackled them this time, we set them in the swing style and they worked.

**FW :** “Ain’t No Time Of Year To Be Alone” is the *curved ball* on the album. This isn’t a Xmas album, and yet here we have a Xmas song.

**ME :** I had a couple of other tunes that we could have used besides that, but they frankly weren’t as good. I’d recorded this Xmas song for the Signature Sounds **“Wonderland”** compilation and I did an acoustic version with a pick-up band that they had assembled for everybody to use at the sessions. I thought it came out really well. I think the **“Wonderland”** version was the first take. I thought this band could take it one step further. I wanted it to really swing. James Taylor put “Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas” on **“October Road,”** so I thought *“What the heck, we’ll put it on there.”* It’s a really fun song, but it’s not your standard fare Xmas song that’s for sure.

**FW :** Well, it’s certainly not “Silent Night.”

**ME :** No. No. If you didn’t listen to the lyrics and just kind of zoned out, it’s a really fun musical journey. And it’s got a great beat to it. It cross references lots of other well known Xmas tunes and we had a blast making all that stuff up. It’s completely goofy, completely over the top, and completely fun.

**FW :** As far as I’m aware that’s your second co-write with Polly, the first being “Little Sister.” Is that going to be a regular deal, or just an occasional one.

**ME :** It tends to be a now and again thing. We haven’t really written anything other than those two songs. I’ll pass a lot of stuff by her while I’m writing it. When I think I’ve finished something I’ll play it for Polly. If she thinks it’s done, it’s done. And if she doesn’t think it’s done I work on it again.

**FW :** So it goes back in the mixer.

**ME :** Yeah. There was a different verse that I’d written for “A Bend In The River” that was really much more of a tragic, almost feeling sorry for the character, verse. I played it for her and she said, *“You know that verse is really sad. And it really takes some of the dignity of the character away. You might want to work on that some more.”* I loved it, and I thought at the time, *“Aw, she’s crazy.”* Then I realised, *“No. She was right,”* like she usually is, so I went back and rewrote it at her behest. She is a great editor for me, behind the scenes. Every once in a while we team up for these funny, goofy little songs. I hope there will be more. We always talk about it, and I certainly wouldn’t rule it out. I was glad to get that song out there sounding like it does. I like the **“Wonderland”** version, but this was the way that it sounded in my head. I’m always trying to get the sounds in my head on CD. I’m always a little nervous about releasing things before I actually get them sounding the way I want them to sound. You know, people may not get it and that’s always the danger. They may not get it even after I get it out there, but at least I know that I gave it my best shot.

**FW** : The closing cut “Pilgrim Highway” works for me on a number of levels. It’s a continuation of what you’ve done on “Troubadour Blues,” “The Farewell Ball” and “A Bend In The River.” It’s another *curved ball* because it’s gospel tinged, in addition to being upbeat melodically. It’s also the natural tune to have ended the album with, because let’s say metaphorically, *the road doesn’t end here.....*

**ME** : Of course here’s another genre that I’d never done anything with. I’d always wanted to write a gospel song, so I wrote one. It came directly out of Dave Carter’s passing. You know Dave had a very mystical kind of spiritual world-view that I was always curious about, but can’t say that I shared the same affinity for. When he passed, I was trying to write a song about what it was like to carry on without him. I found a lot of this like gospel, Christian imagery coming out, which really freaked me out at first. I thought, “*God, you know, I don’t go to church, where is this coming from?*” Anyway, I went with it, because I loved the music so much. I thought the chord progression was really evocative, and it really stirred some emotions in me and made me feel good when I was singing it. So I finished writing it. It’s a song about how – you know, people that we love come and go, and you have to be strong and carry on without them. I mean, wouldn’t it be nice if we were all reunited someday. I haven’t really sussed out what I feel about heaven and hell and all that religious stuff, but this was one thought that I had - that it would be nice to see someone like Dave again - all the people that we’ve lost, and all the people that I’ve lost in my life. So that’s where “Pilgrim Highway” comes from.

**FW** : My take on it, subjectively, was that it was a song about faith and uncertainty, but it also expressed optimism as well.

**ME** : Well you have to have faith in something. At least for me, in the last two years, I’ve tried to have faith in the fact that – if you kind of keep your nose to the grindstone, keep doing things for the right reason, and keep trying to be a good person, that things turn around. Good things come from that. I apply that to everything from my music career to the national weathervane, in terms of the post 9/11 feeling about the way the world is going. I feel like you have to make that choice. And it is a choice every day – you have to say, “*I’m going to be positive about this. I’m going to believe that that there is good in this world and that good does come back around, even though it is very hard to believe in that right now.*” I thought that was a pretty good message to end the record on.

**FW** : And of course you also have your choir on the track, with Kris Delmhurst and Jake Armerding.

**ME** : Of course. We had a fun time doing those background vocals.

**FW** : Presumably you knew them from the Boston music scene.

**ME** : Oh yeah. They’re close musical compadres in every way. I’d been looking for a way to get Kris on one of my records for a while. It just never seemed to work out. This time I got this idea. I said, “*We need background vocals on this. We all need to be singing around the same microphone.*” They came over to my house and Jake brought his computer recording set up, and we set up in my office and crowded around the mic and just sang it live.

**FW** : If that was the situation, then I guess for Kris it was Redbird II, if you know what I mean.

**ME** : Yeah it was almost like that.

**FW** : I said earlier that “Pilgrim Highway” was the natural closer. What are your thoughts about that.

**ME** : I think it was logical, because it is a little different bird than the rest of the record. First of all it’s acoustic. There’s no drums. I think my goal for the record as a whole, was really to kind of establish the up-tempo, fun vibe and pretty much keep it going for as long as I could, not really letting it go for more than a song, before I went back to the fun up-tempo stuff. “Pilgrim Highway,” I think, anywhere else on the album would have interrupted the flow of the record, because it is such a different sound than the other songs. It seemed right to end the record with a kind of spiritual thing. There are a lot of people that have done that over the years. Iris DeMent’s first record ended with one of those. I always remember liking how that happened. So I kind of took my cue from that.

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[2270 words]