



Ellis Paul **"American Jukebox Fables"** Rounder/Philo Records

Thirteen ain't a lucky number for some, but the baker's dozen of Ellis Paul lyrics on **"American Jukebox Fables"** must surely rate as the finest, most literate collection the Mainer has ever assembled. Here's a man who not only understands the game, he is currently at the top of it – his searchlight is firmly focused on the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the world that he/we inhabit[s]. Why therefore, you may ask, is the Folkwax album rating only 9? The answer, sadly, lies in the production, which is credited to Flynn aka Martin Crotty. Crotty was raised near Dublin, Ireland moved to the States in the late 1980's to pursue a career in music, founded the rock band Cliffs of Dooneen, suffered, and recovered from an, almost permanently paralyzing, accident and now fronts another electric band, Flynn. What Crotty brings to the table is a background in rock and pop chops, and, sadly, it's that approach that is to the forefront of the messy sounding opening track "Blacktop Train." The first voice you hear on the track [and therefore on the album] is that of Michigan bred, and now Boston based singer, Rachael Davis – who in the ensuing [almost] five minutes wails like some demented soul diva, while the use of loops and thrash drumming plus Memphis style horns, quite simply amounts to a production on this cut alone, that is – excuse the analogy - a car wreck. Thankfully, the musical presentation of much of **"American Jukebox Fables"** is couched in a framework with which Paul fan are familiar. Essentially "Blacktop Train" is a road song, dedicated to the major highways that criss-cross the length and breadth of America and to the *restless seekers* who make their home there. "Blacktop Train" is only a minor blip....but, sadly, deduct *un point*.

Paul's **"The Speed Of Trees"** appeared almost exactly one year on from 9/11, while his late 2003 musical excursion with longtime buddy Vince Gilbert included the Paul/Gilbert/Teeler collaboration "Citizen Of The World" plus Mark Erelli's superb "The Only Way." The lyrics of the latter pairing were informed by the, to date, defining event of this century, as is this new collection's second track "Kiss the Sun [A Song for Pat Tillman]." In fact Paul takes this still evolving chapter of world history a couple of steps forward. Here's the background - Pat Tillman, a pro footballer for the Arizona Cardinals turned down a \$3.6 million contract in 2002 to join the U.S. Army that May. It amounted to one man's unselfish and personal response to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Sadly, Tillman perished in a fire-fight in Afghanistan during April 2004. "Kiss The Sun" opens with the words of a battlefield serviceman *"When I was nineteen, I joined up with the reserves, And I fought on weekends paid my college tuition,"* who now reflects with bitterness [while serving in Iraq?] *"I'm just a sentinel, Just a sentinel, Fighting an oilman's war, And I need to know, I need to know, Is that what Pat Tillman died for?"* If only we could wipe out and rerun the last four decades of history, we'd maybe make a better job of it. Earlier in this powerful lyric, Ellis muses *"I dreamt I could hear freedom's sweep, in Martin Luther King's speeches (Lenny Bruce, Woody Guthrie), wasn't he reaching for the promise of America?"*

They say, absence makes the heart grow fonder, while time [and distance] heals [old] wounds. A neatly picked acoustic guitar figure opens "Time," while subjectively the song takes stock, from one person's point of view, of a relationship, long over, that ended bitterly – *"The grapevine says you're married now, you've got a baby, House on a hill but we're strangers somehow."* By way of summation and a route to finding closure, the narrator offers an olive branch *"Time is a bird that can't be caged, It takes to the wind and steals the days away, Isn't it time we called a truce?"* Paul's spoken delivery partway through "Marc Chagall" amounts to rapping, and replicates the style of delivery that Luka Bloom has [with regularity] employed for years on his recordings. In essence, "Marc Chagall" is a humour tinged love song sic. *"I made a vow to make a simple life, with a rattle-shaking baby, and a buddha wife, I vowed that only the Red Sox could bring me down."* In the verse that follows, Ellis acknowledges the personal arrival, last

year, of fatherhood, *"Cause everything that's sacred in this whole damn world, is a milky way woman and a baby girl, standing with her arms unfurled, I'm a king in a poor man's clothing."*

Contemplating the fragility with which we, daily, hover between life and that [eternal] other place, the glittering centre-piece, the glistening gem stone in this collection is most surely "Jukebox On My Grave." I think it's safe to say that as much as Paul is a performing songwriter, he is also a [music] fan, and as the song progresses there's mention of this jukebox [and permanent memorial] containing discs by Robert Johnson, Hank Williams, George Jones, The Beatles, Dylan, Rolling Stones [#], Joni Mitchell, Marvin Gaye and Johnny Cash. I guess, if you wanted to be obtuse, the latter aggregation of performers kind of highlights Ellis' age. "Home" is a simple/complex four-letter word, and an exploration of the place where we truly live – *"Home is the woman across the table"* and *"This house is just an address, You're my home."* As the story unfolds, a fire occurs in the narrator's home and out in the street – *"we stood like statues staring while the sirens came in blaring,"* while he and his beloved are offered liquid sustenance by *"the Johnsons."* As the walls and roof of the house tumble, the narrator reveals ongoing faith with *"I can put back all the pieces as long as you're around."*

The lead characters in "Bad, Bad Blood," Parker Evans and his bride, are a modern day Bonny and Clyde who go on a crime spree, all of which is captured by *the voyeur* who considers *itself* to be the altruistic - NOT - arbiter of public taste. After television has broadcast the final Mexican border bloodbath, Ellis delivers the *stinging* closing lines, *"The networks took a break, for Coke and Shake and Bake, nothing sells like a true crime story."* Elsewhere, "Take All the Sky You Need" is a relationship song about seeking freedom, the hook laden hit "Goodbye Hollywood" focuses on a parting, while "Alice's Champagne Palace" set to a tasteful pop beat, is a tribute to a *real life* songwriter venue in Homer, Alaska. The latter chunk of understated pop smarts works, where "Blacktop Train" is overstated. In "She Was" the narrator fools himself, across three verses, by listing countless instances of why *the woman wasn't worth it*, and in the chorus comes to his senses with *"She was, and you're fooling yourself because, she was,"* while the penultimate cut, "Mystified," is another relationship song, albeit one concerning crisis.

In the closing track "Clarity," having buried her mother, with a faded photograph in her hand and a question on her lips *"Do you remember, 20 years ago in September, in Carolina, does that remind you?,"* Annie McGuire goes in search of a father – *"a soldier boy"* - she has never met. The longest cut on this album, at just over five minutes, the precise era that "Clarity" takes place in isn't revealed, other than we're told *"people whispered like rain, of the baby but no wedding gown"* and *"she sang me to sleep, while the Greyhound cut the rain."* Possessing one of those choruses that you, unconsciously, find yourself humming, Annie's goal is quite simple, *"My mother's gone, and a little clarity is all I'm after."* Aren't we all.....

**Note.**

[#] – Not the first time has this rowdy bunch of Brits turned up in an Ellis Paul lyric.

Folkwax Rating 9 out of 10

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 03/05