

Eliza Gilkyson talks about “**Land Of Milk And Honey**”

The interview with Eliza Gilkyson took place on the early evening of Friday 7th May 2004 in the Art Room of the Prema Arts Centre in the village of Uley, Gloucestershire, England. The venue is a deconsecrated Bethesda Chapel and later that evening Eliza's guitarist Jeff Plankenhorn opened the show with a short set of his own songs. I began the interview with Eliza by asking her about album producer Mark Hallman

“**Land Of Milk And Honey**” – the album, politics and more.....

Folkwax The first two records you made for Red House, you co-produced with Mark. “**Land Of Milk And Honey**,” your third for the Minnesota based imprint, finds him credited as the solo producer. Was there a reason.

Eliza Gilkyson Yeah, there really was. I had been so busy touring prior to this recording that I hadn't spent as much pre-production time as I usually spend. One of the advantages we had with this recording was that I had been doing most of these songs on the road, with the guys, for six months to a year, and you can really tell the ones that we had been working on – I think they're more evolved. I didn't need to wear the producers hat because the arrangements were already –

FW In the bag.

EG They really were. Usually when Mark and I co-produce, my job is to work on the arrangements. I didn't have to do that this time. We had one rehearsal and started recording. Over the years I've recorded with Mark, I've learned to trust him more and more [**ED. NOTE.** Apart from her trio of Red House discs [2000 - 2004], Hallman co-produced Eliza's “**Pilgrims**” [1987] and produced “**Legends Of Rainmaker**” [1989]]. Trust is something that's earned and not something I would ever give over without somebody proving to me that they are really worthy of it. Mark had so many great ideas this time. We got halfway through the project and I said “*You know what, I'm going to give you the full production credit on this because we have reached a point where I feel quite comfortable turning over a lot of the things to you.*” He was very pleased about that. He felt very honoured, and took it seriously. That allowed me to relax and be the artist this time. Mark took the ball and ran with it this time.

FW I wondered if the reason was that you wanted to concentrate on your performance.

EG I did.

FW In the liner, you credit Mark with “*going the extra mile (again).*” Was that something specific.

EG He gives me way more than my money is worth. We pay him “\$x” amount of time, and then Mark goes back in for days after days and keeps re-tweaking things. That's above and beyond what I paid him for. It's above and beyond the call of duty. It's a labour of love for him, as every record with me has always been. He puts a lot of his soul in there.

FW I wanted to look at musicians who appear on the album, for a minute. Whose idea was it to get Mary Chapin Carpenter, Patty Griffin and Iris DeMent to sing on the Woody Guthrie song “Peace Call.”

EG That was my call. Usually with Mark the players are my call. I think he trusts my selection of players, because I think a lot about the musicians I want to play on the songs. It was Mark's idea to get Jane Gillman to play dulcimer on “Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson.” That was a great call. Apart from that, I pretty much called it. As for Chapin and Patty and Iris – I could hear their voices, and even selected the verses and parts they sang. When you do a song like that, you want to establish the melody and with each successive verse you want to break away from the melody a little bit. That's how a lot of jazz people do it – how improvisational people do it. You state your melody and then you improvise. I knew that Chapin would be the best to have the second verse, because she'd sing close to the melody with some improvisation. I know that Patty would – because she has a higher voice – she would go off a little bit more. I knew that Iris would go free, so I wanted to stack it in that order.

FW How long were you working on that song, because of their input.

EG I had to move the release date for the record back, because of that song. All of them were in the studio recording or touring. For them to do this, of course, was a labour of love on their part. They, of course, didn't charge me anything. They had to fit it all into their schedules, so it took a long time. Actually that was good, because I planned how the song would sound. What's more, they not only followed what I needed them to do, they also completely gave it their stamp of individuality. I was so impressed.

FW The majority of players on the album are Austin area based musicians. Your brother Tony, who mainly works in California, isn't on this recording.

EG I know. Actually, we had tried to work him on to something, but we ran out of time. I also wanted Plank on there – Jeff Plankenhorn – but he wasn't available. I panicked a little bit and put a lot on to Mike Hardwick, and boy did he deliver. His guitar playing on this record is stunning. He totally has a style that is his own. He plays through a pedal steel volume pedal, and so a lot of that sustain that he's getting, through his electric Gretsch and from his dobro, is through that. He's also a pedal steel player. That's how you get that sustained bed, without having to use keyboards or synthesisers. I don't have a keyboard on the whole record. That's all Hardwick. "Separated," I think, has an incredible guitar solo. It just breaks my heart to hear it. We did a California tour, for two weeks, after we laid down the basic tracks. Every night, on the road, Mike went further out on this song, and when I came back I said, "*Mike, if you don't mind, I need you to go back in the studio and re-cut that song.*" That solo is the # 1 take, he walked in the studio, set up his guitar, plugged it in and that's what he played.

FW You actually touched on my next question, which is, Jeff Plankenhorn was conspicuously absent from the album recording sessions.

EG He was on the road while I was doing the whole recording. I wanted him for dobro and acoustic guitar. What happened is that Hallman ended up playing some exquisite acoustic guitar on "Tender Mercies."

FW Was Jeff on the road working as a solo act.

EG He was out with Gavin DeGraw. He's a New York rock artist and they were playing big stadiums. We tried to work it out, but he didn't have a single day off. We couldn't even get him to go into a local studio to put something down. The three songs I wanted him on were "Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson," "Tender Mercies" and "Not Lonely." He had already worked out some very nice parts for those.

FW In selecting eight of your own songs plus your dad's "Runnin' Away" and the Guthrie song, once you were about to begin recording, did you have a theme for the album in your head.

EG Well, I knew that I wanted to call the album "**Land Of Milk And Honey.**" I knew that the theme was that things are not what they seem. That the *land of milk and honey* is the promise of what we expect from living in the United States, or what human beings expect of the Earth, in a way. Yet the reality is, that our resources are depleted and it's not milk and honey, *it's a hard row to hoe* as Woody Guthrie would say.

FW I wanted to look at the artwork on the CD liner booklet. The main picture on the liner is of a child diving into a pool. Where did you find the photograph.

EG That is by a photo-journalist who is very well known. He was Newsweek's Photographer of the Year, three years ago. His name is Charles Ommaney, he's a British guy who now lives in D.C. and is George Bush's White House photographer. He is one of the great photo-journalists. I was at home and this photo was on his wall. When I first saw it, there was something about this picture that is just so - I don't know, it just draws you in. At first I think it's the body, because you can't figure out – there's something disturbing about the body in mid-air like that. Then you realise he's jumping into the pool, and you think it's some sort of deal where "*It's cool, he's swimming.*" Then when you realise what he's swimming in, and you see this horrible factory, and these burned out buildings, and this sludge water, and his little socks and shoes on the dock there, you realise this is horrible. This is hell. And yet little human is trying

to make some pleasure out of it. When he told me that these little boys were swimming in a toxic dump pool, I cried. It so hurt me. That little boy is probably not even alive now.

FW Where did you meet Ommaney.

EG His wife is a very good friend of mine, and she was one of the producers of Austin City Limits. I was visiting them.

FW The other thing that I wanted to ask about the artwork is that as you thread your way through the liner, to me many of the pictures convey a feeling of Steinbeck's "**Grapes Of Wrath**."

EG Yes, doesn't it have that sense of the Joad family heading West.

FW Was that deliberate.

EG No. I have however to give Cisco [Eliza's son] some credit. He had this idea to take photos. On a tour up through the North West, we thought we'd take the camera and anything that looked like a *milk and honey* shot – we'd take it and see what we've got. There were some that we missed out on. There was a wonderful one in Salt Lake City of a woman's bare breasts, and the sign said "*two good reason's for plastic surgery*." We thought that would have been so great. The shot on the back of the CD case – the one with the American flag, and the caption "*God Bless The World*" - was on a hoarding and it took us thirty minutes to very dangerously negotiate our vehicle, because we were on a major freeway. When we got that shot, we really knew that we had a concept for the artwork.

FW The final thing I wanted to ask in relation to the artwork, is that you have these *milk and honey* pictures and then on the pages where Woody Guthrie's "Peace Call" lyric appears, you have something totally different. There's a peaceful, natural world shot of you surveying some mesas. Where was that picture taken.

EG That was in Utah, right of the side of the highway. It's very typical of what you see in that area. We also wanted to show the potential and beauty that is still there. We didn't want it to be all over – the land is not completely ruined.

FW This album has come out in the early part of 2004 and it's election year in the States. I know that you mentioned earlier that the release of this album had been delayed, but the songs would have been the same. How have the media seen this album in the States.

EG They're on to it, and so is underground radio - the NPR stations are going on it like crazy. I haven't had this great a reaction before from radio. I'm actually surprised that a lot more people, musicians and writers, aren't coming out and saying stuff. I thought "*Well hey, I'm just going to be one of many*." I knew it was going to come out for an election year, and I felt good about it. I don't ever want to look back on this period of my life and say that I hadn't done everything I could to bring down this current regime. I would never want to look back on this time and think that I'd put out a record that was all about me.

FW Looking back on the last five years since you've been a Red House artist, relative to the previous thirty years of your music career, have you any comments.

EG Well, gosh what a difference. I really love the head of my label. He's a friend. There's a down side to being on a smaller label – you can't get the shelf space in record stores, you can't get a publicist or radio person on for a significant length of time. That said, it's better at my age to be on a label where they trust me enough to let me have the kind of control I have. For the first two records I didn't even send Bob Feldman the songs. He just trusted that I was going to put together a great record. He has wonderful ideas. I've never worked actually with a label as closely as I have with this label and had such agreement - and such affection [Laughs]. It's a good deal. There's a part of me that sometimes thinks, "*Should I do this or should I just do my own label, and make more money, but this is like having a home*."

FW Presumably you've toured more in the last five years than in previous times.

EG Yeah, and I have to give my agent credit for that. About four years ago I signed with the Val Denn Agency and she said *“Are you prepared to sleep on people’s couches. Can you do that for maybe two years, because you’re starting all over again.”* I said *“I’ll say yes to everything until I can’t say it anymore.”* – this was my shot and I wanted it. I’ve got a team of people that have worked with me through the hard times so I’m very loyal.

To be continued.

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikle 05/04.
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*Last week Eliza Gilkyson talked about recording her new album “**Land Of Milk And Honey.**” This week Eliza talks about the songs on the album.....*

Part 2 - “**Land Of Milk And Honey**” – about the songs on the album

Folkwax Earlier you said that you road tested some of the new songs over the past year. During that period I know you took part in the Woody Guthrie tribute show “**Ribbon Of Highway, Endless Skyway.**” Leaving “Peace Call” and your dad’s song aside, how much did the Guthrie tour inform the songs you contributed to “**Land Of Milk And Honey.**”

Eliza Gilkyson Well, let’s discuss what songs I wrote during and after the “**Ribbon Of Highway.**” “Tender Mercies” I wrote before the tour. “Hiway 9,” interestingly enough, arrived after the first Woody tour that took place in February of 2003, so was probably written in March or early April. I would say “*Yeah, the Woody tour influenced me.*” I was very, very much turned on to Woody by the end of February last year. “Milk And Honey” which is very hymn like, and certainly pretty world-weary, was definitely influenced by him. What I love about Woody was that he wasn’t frightened to speak his piece. If anything he might have given me the courage and the desire to speak my piece and to say what I have to say, in the political arena.

FW On the tour you were surrounded by *the converted* in the form of Jimmy LaFave, Ellis Paul and -

EG Slaid. I know. Plus we were singing those songs every night. And hearing the spoken word every night too [**Ed. Note.** Bob Childers narrated “**Ribbon Of Highway**”]. Also, I read “**Woody Guthrie : A Life**” by Joe Klein. I don’t think the Guthrie family likes that book. I have to say it really did affect me, because what I got from it was that Woody was so unedited and so outspoken. Whatever came to mind, he said it and that influenced me.

FW In the opening song, “Hiway 9,” George Walker Bush isn’t your only target.

EG No, I know. I was after his father, and I really made a very insulting remark about Secretary of State, Colin Powell. “*A white man hidden in a black man’s skin.*” Bob Feldman actually called me on that one and said “*Are you sure you want to say this?*” I thought about it because, in a way, it’s a racist comment. I meant to insult Powell because he pisses me off more than any of them. I truly think Powell still has a conscience, whereas Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld – I don’t think those guys have a flicker of a thought. They don’t care when they lie. I think Powell has ethics. Powell has military ethics, and military ethics are often very honourable. I wanted to insult him, because there is so much at stake here, and he knows the truth.

FW Maybe he’s frightened to talk.

EG He’s been their military guy for a long time. In a sense, I guess I meant by saying “*a white man in a black man’s skin,*” that I think he’s a traitor to his race. In the same that I think Condoleezza Rice is a traitor to her gender.

FW Would you wish me to print this.

EG Yes I would. I think that Condoleezza Rice is a traitor to her gender. I really do. Anybody that’s not going to support women’s rights is a traitor to her gender as far as I’m concerned. That’s how I see it.

FW Has this song lyric generated negative press in the States.

EG These people are lying. Every time they come out and make a statement, they are lying to the American people. They are costing us lives, money, jobs, environment – they are criminals. I see them all as criminals. I’m ready to come out and say it. It’s true. In other times, they would all have been taken out of office. We live in a strange time that they can bully their way along. **[345 words in red]**

FW But then the current political currency appears to be that the *lie* is the *truth*.

EG It's amazing. And really the fault is not in the stars [Laughs] it is in ourselves [Laughs]. The problem is in our country – I think that people are so over extended with their credit, their money, their jobs, their lives, their time, their energy, that they would rather stay -

FW As they are. Comfortable. Safe.

EG Yes, for one more year, rather than have to confront the reality of our deficit. They want to buy a few more years of keeping everything afloat. Keeping all the balls up in the air, because when they land, the truth is going to be so hard to deal with. When we have to face the reality of our economy and the deficit. Right now everybody is still living *as if*. That's one of the reasons I think really, that they would rather buy into it, than have to take personal responsibility for dismantling and rebuilding a whole infrastructure.

FW Is "Not Lonely" and older song.

EG No, that's new.

FW But it seems kind of autobiographical, so it's an Eliza song.

EG It is in a way. I've had so many women tell me that I'm speaking for them, because I think it's a *rite of passage* for women to – it's an older women's song.

FW Well, the song lyric indicates "*there's a time when I can be on my own.*"

EG I'm cool [Laughs]. It's OK. I don't need a man to save me or take care of me, or put a roof over my head. Of course, I want to be in a relationship, but I don't need it to complete myself, and that is such a hard won *rite of passage*. I wanted to have a song that would take inventory of where women are in the world today. I very much wanted to have "The Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson" be alongside a song like "Not Lonely" and a song like "Separated." "Separated" is also a relationship song, but it's about the sense of separateness that each individual feels, that I think is one of the driving forces of being a human being. The sense of being born into this world where you are separate from everything, and you have this incredible longing that we placate with television or alcohol or whatever – we anaesthetise ourselves because we can't handle the longing that we feel – the desire to somehow cross the boundaries of separateness. So "Yvonne Johnson," "Not Lonely" and "Separated" I think are dealing with where women are today in the world in relationships.

FW The telling images in the song "Tender Mercies" are that it closes with a mother holding a young child, yet it opens with a person holding a bomb -

EG To their chest, yeah. Exactly. It's like she tapes explosives to her chest, and then across the world she holds her child to her chest. I mean, what a privilege that that's what we in the western world get to have with our children, and what a horror, and an unacceptable horror that any mother anywhere would loose her child to that. What kind of quality of life does that child have that that's what they choose.

FW Presumably it was deliberate that you made the bomber, female instead of male.

EG Yeah, that's right. And there been times, where several young girls have blown themselves up. It's just not acceptable. Even though I have been accused of being supportive of suicide bombing by making that statement that was never my intention.

FW The words "*milk and honey*" appear in the "Wonderland" lyric. Later in this album you have the song "Milk And Honey." Of course, they also appear in the album title. Was the appearance of those words just a quirk of fate.

EG Well, no. I already had the song "Wonderland" and I drew the "*milk and honey*" line from it. I hadn't come up with a title for the recording yet, but I'd written "Wonderland." Sometimes you look through the songs to find something that might trigger an idea. I also like that line in "Wonderland," "*Things are never what they seem*" because that was the theme that I wanted the album to convey.

FW To me “Wonderland” is a relationship song for the 21st century.

EG That’s actually right. I’m not asking for future, I’m not asking for promises of happily ever after, I’m saying “*This is it*” - what we have here. And the idea of, we never fell in love, we never had the bells and whistles – to me, I’m not a big bells and whistles fan when it comes to relationships. To me, that usually signals pathology of some sort [Laughs]. It signals some sort of addictive parental paradigm, and is a death knell to its future. I don’t trust the falling in love process anymore. To me, a relationship is much more now about friendship and support. There’s a different kind of love there.

FW We’ve already mentioned “Separated” and it immediately follows “Wonderland.” Was that sequencing deliberate.

EG Yeah. We thought a lot about where to stick those songs. I didn’t want “Wonderland” at the top of the record, because it was *too shiny happy*. That’s not the theme of the record. I wanted it to follow “Tender Mercies,” because “Tender Mercies” was such a hard hit. I wanted something pleasant and hopeful to follow it. I also wanted something before we went into “Separated” that would release the energy, before I asked people to go inside and do some hard listening work. There is a whole kind of guiding that you have to do on a record – the same goes for “Yvonne Johnson.” You wouldn’t put “Yvonne Johnson” at the top of a record. You want to bring everybody way deep into the record before you can deliver something like that.

FW Where did you find out about Yvonne Johnson.

EG I got her book “**Stolen Life: The Journey Of A Cree Woman**” [Random House of Canada, ISBN 0-676-97196-2]. She co-wrote it with Rudy Wiebe, a Canadian author. I found the book in an airport in Canada. I just grabbed it as a book to read, but was overwhelmed by it. I couldn’t put it down. I inhaled it.

FW Was she someone that you were previously aware of.

EG No I had never heard of her story, had no idea what it was about. Just picked the book up at random, read it and freaked out. I couldn’t believe it. The story of this person finding herself - redeeming herself in the most horrific circumstances that could ever be imagined, still wakes me up in the middle of the night and chokes me up. I have so much admiration for her.

FW So you’re in an airport bookstore looking at, wall-to-wall books. Why pick that one.

EG I think that Yvonne and I have a connection that has yet to be played out. I really do. There was some synchronicity there, absolutely.

FW There’s deliberate blood spatters on the vehicle windscreen on the pages where the lyric to “The Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson” appears.

EG My graphic artist did that. I actually was a little worried that it was over the top, but I let it go. Plus, her story is bloody and a horrific.

FW After you read the book, did you try to contact Yvonne.

EG I have been trying to reach her for months. Actually, I have just recently got her a copy of the CD. We’re waiting to hear back. It’s very hard to get anything into the prison system. I’ve even sent things to the wrong address. Finally, through a fan that came to one of my shows and happened to be in the Canadian prison system, I got a letter to Rudy Wiebe, who got an E-Mail to Yvonne, and then we got an address. She’s a co-writer on the song with me.

FW Did you give that credit because of some details you abstracted from the book.

EG Two prayers she wrote, appear in the book. They’re overwhelming, and I put them in the song. That’s how I built the song. It took me months to write the song. It was so important to show how horrible her circumstances were, and then bring out the aspect of redemption. It was daunting and I kept putting it off. Finally I sat down and found a groove on the guitar - a progression that I really liked. I thought,

"This is perfect for that song, but how about the lyrics?" I found her prayers and started singing them over this progression. It was unbelievable, I didn't have change them, they rhymed. There was a certain cadence to them that actually worked. It was wonderful. She's a natural poet.

FW Finally, we come to "Peace Call." How did you find the song.

EG Jeff Plankenhorn and I found it in an out-of-print Guthrie songbook that Nora Guthrie had loaned us for the tour. Nora had asked me if I'd like to come into the archives in New York and pick out a song. I was very excited about it. I had already had her permission to go in, but hadn't had a chance to go to the archives – which I'd like to do someday. She has given Billy Bragg and Wilco and other people some of Woody's songs, but no women have done that. She thought my voice would be right for a Woody song. Plank was looking through this book, and said *"Look at this one, this is a cool song."* He liked the chord structures of it. I wanted something that was an anti-war song, or a pro-peace song. I wanted an anthem for today. I knew that Woody would have at least one. That's why I was anxious to get into the archives, but we didn't even need the archives. It was just so clear, that that was the song. It's also a great melody.

FW Once you had those two songs, were they obvious opening and closing tracks for the album.

EG Yes. Bob Feldman wanted me to put "Peace Call" up front, with all the famous singers, but I thought *"No. I've got to end this album with an up note. I can't take people on this journey and then just leave them stranded with "Milk And Honey"- which is like, well let's just kill ourselves."* "Milk And Honey," the hymn, is sort of that darkest hour before the dawn and opens with *"Oh what fools these mortals be"* – that's the point of despair, and then in the last verse there's the line *"What man has loosed upon the sea cannot be undone."* That's also despair, before you come back around, and rally and commit yourself to the peace path again.

FW Would you say **"Land Of Milk And Honey"** is a consciously angry album.

EG Yeah, and it's also a *rite of passage* for me. I feel very, very at peace with myself about making this statement.

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikle 05/04.
[2540 words]