



Ellis Paul's "3000 Miles" and Susan Werner's "All Mapped Out"

– DVD's that share a *hip connection*

The precise nature of the *join* referred to in the title of this article will be revealed in a little while. Ellis' DVD has a running time of nearly three hours, and I guess "*watching it*" could be described as being invited to go to your favourite restaurant by your best buddy. What do I mean? Well there are four segments that compose "**3000 Miles**," and in order on the disc they are: *the concert*, *the documentary*, *the music lesson* and *the talk show*. Now common sense normally prevails in terms of consuming the *courses* you have chosen from the restaurant menu, whereas with DVD anything goes. That said, we'll check out each segment in the order I have listed.

The concert was filmed on the final date of a six-week tour that Ellis undertook with Susan Werner through the Fall of 2001. So there you have it, your first Werner connection. *The concert*, which took place at the Somerville Theatre, Boston on Wednesday 3rd October 2001, amounts to an eleven song main set and one song encore. Ellis opens with "Give In, Give Up" a song from his 2002 "**The Speed Of Trees**" album. Before moving on to perform "Maria's Beautiful Mess" which first appeared on his 2CD "**Live**" collection and later on "**Speed**," Ellis pitches for the sympathy vote with "*This is the last show of Susan's and my tour. So sad...[pause]...for us. We've become very, very good friends. I just don't want to go on alone you know.*" As for the song, it appears that a certain lady – the ex-girlfriend of a friend - in Nashville had taken the musician's eye, but wary of involvement he *imagined* their affair in a song lyric. The bulk of songs Ellis performs are drawn from "**Live**" [*], his, *then*, current album "**Sweet Mistakes**" and from *the future*, "**The Speed Of Trees**." Introducing "3,000 Miles" [*], as Susan Werner joins Ellis onstage, he immediately dives into "*This is the Sonny & Cher portion of the show.*" Then adds, "*We both want to be Cher.*" Alternating between guitar and keyboards Werner contributes to four songs, and obviously feeling cold dons the jacket that Ellis had discarded earlier. With Werner sat at the piano ready to perform "Conversation With A Ghost," he references them as The Captain & Tennille. There's a Woody Guthrie sequence in *the documentary*, and Messrs. Paul and Werner recall this son of Okemah, Oklahoma with a rendition of, the increasingly popular, "Way Over Yonder In the Minor Key" [#] a song that first surfaced on the Billy Bragg/Wilco collaboration "**Mermaid Avenue**" [1998]. And let's not forget that the motto "*This guitar kills fascists*" was emblazoned on the side of Guthrie's guitar, while the soundboard of both of Paul's guitars feature an American flag and the legend "*Anti Terror Machine*," thanks to a black Sharpie pen. Commenting that the song came to him in a dream, Ellis closes out the duo portion of his set with "New Orleans."

Alone again, and by way of introducing "The Speed Of Trees" Ellis reveals that the title came from a female friend he was visiting in California's Big Sur, while subjectively the song is about "*love, emotion and laying down roots.*" "Sweet Mistakes" was featured in the Farrelly Brothers movie "**Shallow Hal**" [2001] which starred Jack Black and Gwyneth Paltrow. The brothers included Paul's "The World Ain't Slowin' Down," the eleventh song in this set, on the soundtrack of "**Me, Myself And Irene**" [2000]. Prior to performing the former song, Ellis publicly thanks the brothers for their faith in his music and adds that his royalty cheques from that source, unusually, have "*a comma in them.*" If the foregoing was a welcome financial benefit, then "Did Galileo Pray?," in his own words, "*has brought a lot of cool stuff into my life.*" There was a Galileo thermometer, which he just happened to have with him, while another fan's gift was a graduate thesis focusing on the historic events portrayed in the lyric. Invited to visit the History of Science Library at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, he was shown around by the librarian Marilyn, who was in her mid sixties – "*little cat eye glass hanging from a chain around her neck, wool*

skirt and she absolutely loves her job." Shown Galileo's signed personal copy of a book he published in the 1600's, that had handwritten corrections in the margin, Marilyn whispers, *"it's worth a million dollars."* Ellis adds, *"I've got it downstairs, if you want to take a look of it after the show."* Following his performance of the aforementioned "The World Ain't Slowin' Down," Ellis brings this 70 minute long DVD segment to a close with an encore of "Beautiful World" performed acappella. Following *the concert* there's a *hidden track*, and in some unidentified upstairs room which is chock full of guitar cases – you can see a streetlamp shining in the street outside - Ellis performs the bluesy "Rattle My Cage."

The documentary, sixty some minute in length, is subtitled **"Between Songs – On The Road With Ellis"** and dates from the fall of 1995. This road trip movie begins in Somerville, Mass., and featuring around fourteen vignettes, first heads north to Vermont and then south through Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia before sweeping west into Texas, Arizona and ending up in California. Well almost, as the final vignette finds the young musician and his filmmaker/co-passenger, Matt Linde, *somewhere* in Utah, on the morning after Ellis' car has been totalled in a road accident. There's even the hint, if you watch closely, that Ellis is still in shock. From one point of view it could be said that this segment of the DVD is well past its *sell by date*, and while may be true it is also a historic record of a particular period in this songwriters life. The apprentice is serving time, and learning his chosen trade with nary a whiff of Nora Guthrie, the Farrelly's, or cheques with commas. Some vignettes drag, as they have no finite beginning, middle or end, although by merely *being* they substantiate the drudgery of *the road*. In an early vignette, post a Burlington Coffee House gig, Ellis senses the fragility of his marriage with *"we're living two separate lives."* A Woody Guthrie poster in the foyer of the Winston-Salem venue attracts his attention and he urges the audience to read the text. Standing next to the poster, he proudly displays the Woody Guthrie tattoo on his upper arm. Onstage, he proudly shows the audience a stone recovered from the overgrown foundation of Guthrie's Okemah home, with the words *"I had 1000 ticks on my body after getting the stone."* During a stopover in Decatur, the Atlanta Braves win the World Series 4 games to 2, and in Atlanta he swaps tunes with his pal Kristian Bush [with Andrew Hyra in the duo Billy Pilgrim]. Playing to a not-so-full house in New Orleans, there's compensation in spending time with another musician pal, Gina Forsyth. Earlier, as they hit outskirts of that city, Ellis launches into the late Steve Goodman's classic "City Of New Orleans." At Houston's Mucky Duck he admits to the audience that he's not much of a blues player but *"I've got a pretty convincing blues face."* Commenting that it's *"a mix of intrigue and disgust"* Paul launches into a blues riff accompanied by a selection of facial contortions. A White Raven, Felton, California patron recalls how Ellis *might have* originally turned up there a few years earlier with *"Keith of City Folk."* True or not, I'd advise Folkwax readers to check out the music of Keith Greeninger. Each vignette is introduced by a white print title on a black screen. Following the Utah calamity, the closing legend reads "The odometer is still running....." To which I would simply add *"and long may it do so."* **"Between Songs"** shows Ellis during his *scufflin' days*, the point being that they were integral to the realisation of the truly superb songwriter we know today.

Heaven knows there are enough guitar pickers on this planet, of all ages and skills, and for them the *music lesson* makes essential viewing. In a span of some thirty minutes Ellis explains the chord structures of "Maria's Beautiful Mess," "Words" and "The Speed Of Trees." An active advocate of *open guitar tunings*, Ellis highlights how to introduce space into a song, and use rhythm to express emotion. Employing the guitar as a percussive instrument, using his right [picking] hand, Ellis indicates how the palm can make a kick drum sound, the thumb can add a bass guitar, and a snare drum sound can be created through snapping the string. As for his # 1 Rule of Songwriting, that boils down to *"writing what you know and writing what care about."* For the *talk show* Ellis is joined by fellow Boston area residents and songwriters - Christopher Williams and Vance Gilbert, and it takes place at the same venue as the *guitar lesson*. Gilbert appears as gregarious in private as he is onstage, while Williams eventually warms to the discussion becoming an active participant. They each describe where they were born and raised, who influenced them musically and how, why and where they started out as musicians. The threesome met around ten years ago, at Boston music venues, and remain close even critiquing each other's work. By way of displaying diversity, Ellis comments that in his spare time he paints, while Gilbert constructs model planes. Williams' hobby of playing drums has evolved, in the last few years, into a second career. When the conversation turns to the *art of songwriting*, Ellis comments that to be focused *"a song needs something specific to create a picture in people's heads."* In that regard, it must be *"subjective and objective."* As for the melody all affirm that it is the *glue/foundation* that holds a song together. According to Ellis the song must incorporate a *"life experience"* that allows audience members to deduce *"you wrote that song about me."* There's a similar segment in Werner's DVD, where she is talking to fans after a show, except that Werner prefaces Paul's deduction with *"The songs have more impact if they are not*

about me." The conclusion being - if a writer can achieve all the above, they are undoubtedly succeeding the ultimate-aim – making connection with their audience.

"All Mapped Out" or **"Life On The Road With Susan Werner,"** a film by Harry Keates, could have been titled "Me Susan, She Jane." The other main participant being Susan's road manager, Jane Paul [>], of whom Werner comments at one stage *"She's the roadie type you know.....she's tough"* and, later, while opening fortune cookies, suggests Jane be nominated for the *"Grammy for the Best Contemporary Folk Roadie."*

In applying the *glue* to his movie, Keates employs a number of thoughtful film tricks. For a start the film opens and closes with Susan performing, "Movie Of My Life," *the hidden cut* on her 1998 album **"Time Between Trains."** Part of "Outtakes," the twelfth and closing segment of this film, the second performance of "Movie Of My Life" can only be described as *killing my song less than softly*, but, with humour. Filmed over a period of some six weeks, during Werner's Spring 2002 tour of New England venues, a number of sequences feature travelling in the rental car between venues. The god's must have smiled on Keates when filming one of those journeys, as S. Werner's vehicle is overtaken by one of C.L.'s light blue liveried trucks with the legend WERNER emblazoned on the tail-gates.

We've jumped ahead however. In the opening sequence its 12.30pm on a Saturday morning, and in true *not before noon* songwriter fashion, Werner sleepily opens her Cambridge Marriott hotel room door to pick up the newspaper. In the room, Jane and Susan discuss the load-in time at Club Passim, and then Susan let's the viewer into a few musician secrets regarding hotel room survival. For instance, carry your own coffee and breakfast cereal. Thankfully, and unlike some music documentaries, Keates includes a considerable number of complete song performances threaded throughout the film. It may be less arty, but it sure as hell gives the *real music fans* what they want. Ten songs are presented that way, while performance of the late Fred Neil's "Everybody's Talkin'," begins in the studios of Boston radio station WUMB and ends at The South Church in Portsmouth. In terms of the aforementioned ten, Werner's nuance filled performance of the conversational [meeting of two old friends], "Sorry About Jesus," at The Muse at The Grey Goose in Londonderry, New Hampshire is simply stunning.

As I mentioned, there are a number of road sequences and in one Susan discusses that perennial conundrum for the performer – the next album. She wonders *"do people want something new or something that sounds like we've heard before?"* and then adds that you have to avoid the trap of *"making the familiar too familiar"* because then *"nobody cares."* On the second Saturday morning while having breakfast in a [hotel?] restaurant, Susan explains to Harry that she sees the music business as a game of *"two shots."* *"If you're new"* and *"If you're good"* and concludes that currently and personally, *"Something is about to happen. It's getting more solid."*

Sound check over and with a few hours to go to show time, at The Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, the barriers between *boss* and *employee* melt as, like a pair of conspiratorial schoolgirls, Jane and Susan look straight at the camera and confirm *"This is a print out gig. We love print out gigs."* In other words the venue is *taking care of business*. As if to further emphasise the point Susan offers, *"This is a good gig. First of all there's a backstage area. You're not getting dressed in the truck. You know what I'm saying. Then you have food.....and the food is right here. You don't have to leave to get the food. There's a real piano. That's a Steinway probably [<].....hell, if I know, but it's good."* The latter are not issues that cross a fan's mind to often, and maybe they should, since the musician up there on the stage also happens to be a human being. Later that night while introducing the witty and sharp wordplay that is "Misery And Happiness" [which she introduces as "Love Is Not There" unless I missed the point], Susan opines *"This song indicates a change in perspective."* A change, she offers, relative to her older material, since that was full of *"my usual cynicism, scepticism and doubt"* which have *"made me the celebrated obscurity that I am."* Self-deprecating humour can be a powerful weapon.

Pitched almost halfway through the film, there's a sequence in Werner's office/home in Chicago. Raised near Manchester, Iowa, the musician headed westward again, after more than a decade in Philadelphia, a couple of years ago. The sequence opens with a panorama of the city skyline, with Werner calling of sightings of the Sears Tower, the Chicago River and the Aon Building, then the camera pans out to reveal a postcard. Pride of place on the guided tour of her office - the desk, her musical instruments – is reserved for the piano stool that Susan dubs *"The throne of genius"* and then adds *"That's where all the great ideas come....."* I'll leave you to figure out how she completed that sentence. Same venue, in a

tranquil moment, Werner enquires *"What is it like to actually try to write a song, you're wondering?"* and offers, *"Well it starts with daydreaming."* Looking out the office brings *"Like looking at the lake, or the no parking sign."* She vainly waits for the muse to arrive, but the elusive one was someplace else that day.

Leaning back on the piano stool after finishing the sound check at Northampton's Iron Horse, Werner confides, *"That's the thing I want to do more than anything else, is just play the piano, because it is so hard. It's really hard. It's harder than anything else. Everything else is easy. Smiling for the people. Singing for the people. Easy. Play real good – hard."* Following a sequence where three fans, who [neatly] are name checked in the closing credits, give their opinion of Susan as a performer and writer, Werner offers her thoughts on the internet. *"When it first started out I was interested in the whole thing. How it would impact on the business."* Referring to the, consistently, inane nature of numerous digest postings she adds, *"Now it's like the weather. It just goes by,"* although she qualifies that thought with the insight that the web has empowered some musicians. *"Something got louder when the internet started up. There's an upside to it for artists who have dropped below the radar."*

Where, so far, only one song is performed in full at any single venue, Susan is supported by a drummer and bass player for her New York City, Bottom Line appearance and is seen performing three numbers. After "Yellow House" she comments, *"That song was in a movie about a year and a half ago."* Name checking **"What Women Wants,"** much to the delight of the audience, Werner launches into a blues slide guitar riff and sings *"I did not go to see it... 'cause I figured I already knew."* As I mentioned earlier, **"All Mapped Out"** closes with "Outtakes" where, for instance, at The Ritz, Werner switches on what she calls the *"hot breath of the devil"* under floor heating, while playing guitar during a sound check, Jane offers *"I have very limited talent."*

Part of the wonder, and beauty and the excitement of writing about music is the never-ending search for the next song that gives you goose bumps, or sends that tell-tale shiver down your spine. They say that most folks recall precisely where they were and what they were doing when the major news event of 22nd November 1963 broke. In that vein, I recall details of first hearing songs that have made a major impact on my psyche. DVD segment eleven finds Susan performing "May I Suggest." When she performed that song on Saturday 26th May at the 2001 Kerrville Folk Festival, I was sat at this desk listening to the web broadcast. Relative to GMT, it was probably around 5.00am Sunday morning. While far from being a hi-fi link, the words of that emotion filled number sparkled like a bright new diamond. The goose bumps were awesome.

Closing out Werner's DVD is a six-song "Mini Concert," that includes archive film from 1994 when, perhaps, Susan's performance skills were a little less polished, though her talent was obvious, through to clips from 2001/2002 that show her as the master of word, lyric, song introduction and facial expression that now stands in our midst. Whether you are a fan of either of these artists, taken in context – for instance, Ellis' road trip movie was made during a relatively early phase of his career, whereas Susan's features the life of an established artist - they allow us to glimpse the countless facets that go to make up life for a singer/songwriter. In the process these films inform and, if they succeed in that regard, the viewer should come away a little wiser and possibly more appreciative of the hard work that has gone into informing the talent and skill this pair possess.

Note.

[*] – Just in case there are any *trainspotters* reading this, three of the **"Live"** songs appeared on Ellis' earlier albums **"Say Something," "Stories"** and **"Translucent Soul"** the front cover of latter being a tribute to the Dutch artist, M.C. Escher.

[#] – Joel Rafael included the song on his Y2K album **"Hopper"** then cut his own Guthrie tribute album **"Woodeye."**

[>] – Darn, an obtuse Ellis connection.

[<] – It was. At The Bottom Line they had a Yamaha !

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 03/03

[3255 words break down as - Ellis 1735 / Susan 1520]

