

A Conversation with Eliza Gilkyson
by Frank Goodman (5/2006, Puremusic.com)

After a productive and adventurous lifetime just under the radar, Eliza Gilkyson is progressively becoming a person who needs no introduction. I just spent the last weekend at Merlefest in NC, an Americana festival with 80,000 attendees, and saw her perform a handful of times, either playing her own songs with John Edmunds on guitar, or singing alongside people like Jimmy LaFave, Slaid Cleaves, Peter Rowan, and others.

On top of being an outstanding songwriter (sometimes with a political bent in recent years) she possesses one of those voices that on the one hand blends miraculously with others and yet is immediately recognizable. There is so much experience, emotion and intelligence in her voice that it's more than a pleasure to listen to; it's an education, in the best sense of the word.

(By the way, during our stay in Austin for SXSW, we were also lucky to run into Eliza's brother Tony, playing what seemed to be a pickup gig outside at a popular local hangout. The cat is unbelievable; you've got to check him out in our Videos section on the SXSW page.)

It's the year of Eliza; she swept the awards at Folk Alliance and at the Austin Music Awards. She's so self-effacing and right-sized about it that it really couldn't have happened to a better artist, or to a more deserving one. If you don't own a copy of *Paradise Hotel*, consider there to be something important missing from your collection.

It's rare to be asked into a subject's home for an interview; I was charmed by the opportunity, and by the atmosphere of her abode. In every way, she is precisely the kind of artist we like to get behind and bring to our readers. At some point, be sure to check out the clips on the Listen page, and make her music part of your own.

Puremusic: This is a beautiful living room, how you bring different cultures together. They seem so unified here, the Tibetan and the Native American and the Central American and the Mexican. They all seem to fit together in your house.

Eliza Gilkyson: Well, all roads lead to Rome is my policy. I'm not really stuck on any one. I love religious art. I'm very interested in deities. I feel like those deities and those archetypes exist in all different cultures, but I think there are very similar archetypes that cross all cultural boundaries, and that interests me.

PM: And there are so many similarities, though geographically so far removed.

EG: Exactly.

PM: The same things keep popping up for very good reasons.

EG: Joseph Campbell, I think he was the one who really made the link up between all of the various cultural archetypes. My belief is that they exist within us--

PM: [laughs] Absolutely.

EG: --and that different cultures name different things, but they're like an energy that you tap into from the compassionate mother, to the warring god, and all the ones in between.

PM: Yeah, I mean, we're really a finite number of elements, we human beings. I mean, we think a finite number of things, we feel a finite number of things.

EG: Yeah, exactly.

PM: We just don't think so, but we do.

EG: And that's one of our finite thoughts, after all--

PM: Our infinite-ness.

[laughter]

EG: Yeah.

[Here I bring up a couple of very close mutual friends, to establish a "transitive" connection or to send regards]

PM: So I mean, it's been a long roll now, but ever since the latest record came out, I mean, there seems to be a well-deserved mounting amount of attention on you and your work, it just seems like everything is really coming together. Is that how it feels for you? That's certainly how it looks from the outside.

EG: I sense things building, but I've learned to not rely on anything outside of just my own little trajectory, in terms of how I perceive things going on in the business, because I've always been wrong. [laughs]

PM: Right.

EG: So I'm really always surprised when good things happen, because I've just been under the radar for so long that I have no expectations.

PM: Right. It's a good place to come from.

EG: And I don't mind that anymore. It used to really disturb me. I think it was painful for me to realize that I wasn't going to be the next something, and to realize now I'm too old to be the next something, and then that's--The thing is, any time you try to pigeonhole yourself, it turns out it's not that. I do think that people are more interested in what I'm doing. I think I've been saying the same thing for thirty years, so maybe I found a better way to say it now, and I think that's part of it. But I also think that people are more interested in what I do than they were when I first started doing it. So that may be part of it, too, that we're all just kind of on the same page, where maybe we weren't before.

PM: I watched the momentum building when we reviewed *Paradise Hotel* when it first came out, and we were certainly very big on it at Puremusic.com, and then watched it start popping up all over the place. But then it's been progressively a year of accolades.

EG: Yeah. Well, the previous release, *Milk & Honey*, was really a milestone. That landed me into politics, and I think that's the first time that I ever really went out on a limb with a political statement, and I think that was because my personal path just routed me into politics. It wasn't some plan I had. But I think people resonated with that. And at the time I put out *Milk & Honey*, it was before Steve Earle had put out his record. And not too many people were taking political risks.

PM: Right.

EG: I think that's because they didn't know which way the wind was going to blow. It was right when the Iraq war was going on. When we first went to war with Iraq it was very uncomfortable to say anything against the current regime's policies, because we were made to feel that we were evil. People were very uncomfortable with speaking out their actual views on the war initially, because the right-wing had really sewn up the spin.

When you make a record, you make it nine months before you release, so you don't know where the climate is going to be. And a lot of people warned me with *Milk & Honey*, they were like, "Don't make a topical record, because by the time they come out, things can be completely shifted, or they're topical for a season, and then they die." So I thought about it. They just said it's death. And I thought, you know what? I'm not famous enough to worry about that kind of shit.

[laughter]

EG: Nobody knows who I am, anyway, so it wasn't like, "Oh, no, radio is not going to play you." Radio never plays me anyway, so it didn't matter.

PM: Right.

EG: I didn't have the same kind of ax hanging over my head that more famous people have, the fear that they were going to be blacklisted, or they were going to be topical to the point of losing a fan base or something. I didn't have to worry about that, so that gave me a freedom that maybe some people didn't have. And then after *Milk & Honey*, I put

out *Paradise Hotel* right that fast, I think I just kind of had this whole series of songs that really worked well together, so it seemed good to put them out close together.

PM: Yeah.

EG: And I haven't written another song in almost a year now.

PM: Since *Paradise Hotel*?

EG: Yeah. Those songs just came out, and I haven't--I've just-- [laughs] I haven't even been in my studio.

PM: But haven't you been continually on the road since *Paradise Hotel* came out?

EG: Yes. And I told my agent, "Next year I'm taking three months off." Because you can't write when you're on a forced march.

PM: No. You can't write on the road--very few people can. How many dates did you play this year?

EG: I've never even checked, but I know I was playing more than I want. I worked pretty much steady through the year, with a little bit easier on it in the winter.

PM: But yeah, the year of accolades seemed to culminate a night or two ago here in Austin, right?

EG: Yeah.

PM: I mean, you got all kinds of things. You got Songwriter of the Year and Vocalist of the Year, and Folk Band of the Year, and...

EG: And the same with the Folk Alliance, I kind of swept that one, too. Record of the Year, Song of the Year.

PM: I mean, that's amazing, right?

EG: It's hard for me to even talk about it, actually. And I'm very bad when I get the awards. I stand up there like an idiot. I get blank. It's something I need to change. I'm so used to not doing this, that I'm always surprised and dumbfounded, because I've had a whole career of non-acknowledgement. It has been a great career.

PM: [laughs] There's no blueprint for acknowledgement, right?

EG: No, there really isn't, exactly. So I really am having to--I need to learn the language of acceptance and gratitude.

PM: [laughs]

EG: And mostly I'm just grateful I've been able to play music my whole life. I've got it kind of honed down to that, that I just feel lucky that I've been able to make it in music on any level. But now to get all of this acknowledgement, it feels wonderful. And there are a lot of people who really have been part of that. And certainly in this town, the radio has been--God, they've just been on it.

PM: Is the radio in this town all over your record?

EG: Well, KUT has been really good about playing the political stuff. They've been fearless about it. And KGSR, they shoot it in where they can, but they're a Clear Channel station, so they--

PM: Oh, right, they can't--

EG: Yeah, they have to be careful. But I think KGSR has done as much good as KUT, in that they've just been playing the songs that really feel good on the radio.

PM: So what do they play?

EG: Well, they've been playing "Paradise Hotel," which is a dark song.

PM: Yeah.

EG: And they played "Hard Times in Babylon," which is about a suicide. I mean, they have been just great. They don't play the political stuff, but they're not just playing the happy tunes. [laughs] I don't think I have any happy tunes.

PM: Oh, happier--

EG: No, I do, yeah. I have "Borderline," and they played "Borderline."

PM: "Borderline" is a great song.

EG: But they went big on "Calm Before the Storm," that duet with Shawn Colvin. And "Calm Before the Storm" is about what I think is going to be the massive correction that is coming down the pike for this country, and so that is not a perky, shiny, happy song.

PM: Can we talk about that, what you mean by "the correction"?

EG: Sure. I think we are in for a correction. I think we have carried our greed game, our consumer game, to a point where we are going to have to be smacked around by reality. And we've not heeded the warning signs. And I think we're all to blame for it, because I think we're all incredibly comfortable, and we have a lot invested in our comfort right now. I mean, I don't know how that correction is going to manifest. But I think a lot of

that depends on what kind of communities you live in and how civilized people are. But I think we saw in the South--in New Orleans--what happens when people don't have basic necessities, and they--a couple more disasters like that, and I think systems could fail. And the fact is our deficit--the people pooh-pooh it, the deficit doesn't mean anything, but [laughs]--

PM: The hell it doesn't.

EG: It means that when all the balls fall down to the ground and we have to face reality, it's not going to be a pretty picture. So I don't want to be the bearer of gloom and doom and apocalypse, or anything, but the only way out of the mess we're in is to face reality. And that is going to require a tightening of the belt and a sense of doing without that I don't think any of us have known in our lifetime, that's for sure.

PM: Yeah, because our whole M.O. really revolves around comfortableness.

EG: I know. And I think we're all to blame. I don't think this is an along the party line thing. I mean, we know the Bush regime is off the map, that they're not sane, they're not good businessmen at best. [laughs]

PM: Right.

EG: But the Democrats, I mean, we've consumed oil, and we've been an empire on the march through Republican and Democratic regimes. So consumerism is a disease that we're all falling prey to. Yeah, I don't know how we're going to stop. But one thing I know is we didn't find happiness with all our flat screen TVs and everything.

PM: It didn't turn out.

EG: No, it didn't buy us anything. So I think this correction may actually be that we may find a fellowship that we haven't had. Certainly, hopefully, it will build compassion. I hope it just doesn't turn us all into animals, you know, every man for himself. I think carrying the humanist flame through what comes is going to be the real challenge.

PM: There are so many people in Austin right now for SXSW. Just the taxi situation, as a microcosmic element--

EG: Uh-huh.

PM: --just the way people are acting around cabs--

EG: Uh-huh.

PM: --it's scary.

EG: Just grabbing them, and fighting over them.

PM: Yeah. I was interviewing Jules Shear at a hotel on North I-35 a little while ago. And there were a lot of people waiting for the cab at the hotel. And I needed to get to the Convention Center, but had to go straight to your house because it got to be too long a wait

EG: Yeah.

PM: And I noticed that when a cab came, I was in the front seat before anybody could get there, and went, well, it shows you where you're at, anyway, dude.

EG: Every man for himself. I know, it's awful what we do. And I mean, I'm putting in a water collection system in my house so that I make sure I have the water. It would be challenging to see how much we'll share. But I wish we didn't have to get to that point. I wish that we weren't as hooked as we are on everything. But this is what civilizations do.

[And my host had served a sample of this rainwater that a friend of hers had supplied her.]

PM: You can taste that rainwater.

EG: Yes, it's rich.

PM: Yeah. And it's really--like it's soft.

EG: It's soft, exactly.

PM: Really soft.

EG: It's like drinking a great old mellow wine.

PM: Wow, that's unbelievable.

EG: Yeah, yeah.

PM: It's got no bite, no aftertaste, no anything.

EG: Exactly. It's pure. It's soft. That's exactly the word you would use. He was telling me today, he said, "Water is billions of years old, and it's just recycled. And what we're looking at when water comes out of the sky, it's just water from everywhere else that has gone through a purification system, the ultimate purification system."

PM: Wow.

EG: Yeah.

PM: As a person who considered himself as much Nashvillian as anything else--I mean, I've been on the move my whole life--it's great to drop into a town like this. I really like Austin a lot.

EG: Yeah.

PM: It's so--

EG: It's a well-kept secret or something.

PM: Oh, it's so funky and warm-hearted. It's a very sincere town.

EG: It's so good-natured. I know. It's like there's a lot of love in the room, man.

PM: Yeah, you know?

EG: You just can't help but notice. And you go outside and it's like leaving the sacred--like the happy valley, or something. I looked at a lot of places, and I wouldn't even think about living somewhere else. There are places I wouldn't mind having a cabin in the mountains or something in the summer, because it's so hot.

PM: Right.

EG: But I think this is a great community. It's really about the people here. Everybody looks out for everybody.

PM: And it's not a bunch of kids. There are a lot of cool grownups around.

EG: I know! There are grownups! And it's something about aging with your peers that really--especially in this industry, which puts such a premium on your age--we're all kind of going through it together, so it doesn't have that stigma of a youth-oriented industry.

PM: Nashville has that to a degree, but this is like the hippie and the post-hippie corner.

EG: You're right.

PM: That works for me.

EG: I've checked out Nashville, and I thought there are some really good people there, but I want to go where the movement--where the love people are. And there's always something going on musically here. It's certainly connected to the global music scene, so you don't feel like--it's not like St. Paul--or was it Minneapolis--where there was a music scene, but it sort of felt closed, like all locals. But this is a traveling show, that coming in and out.

PM: And unlike Nashville in that way. People don't come to Nashville to play, because it's generally considered a lousy town to play in.

EG: I haven't played Nashville in five years.

PM: Nobody will come out.

EG: No, they won't come out, and the venue situation is so difficult. It's like a showcase thing, where you come in with your audience for a show and then they change the room over? That doesn't sound like fun.

PM: Yeah, I mean, here, not only do bands from other places come through, but the local bands have good audiences.

EG: It's true. Of course, you don't want to play every weekend in your hometown.

PM: No.

EG: But still, if you pace yourself, they just keep coming to hear you. That's what people want to do here is go hear music. That's the big thing. You just go out and hear music. And even if you're going to play one night and there are three other bands in your genre playing that same night, you still fill the room. [laughs] Everybody has a good night.

PM: I notice in Nashville, for instance, that most of my musician friends don't go out to shows.

EG: Yeah.

PM: I say, "Well, you like them, why wouldn't you go out and see that band?" "Well, I'm in clubs all the time, it's my work." I say, "Yeah, but this isn't work. This is going to go see so and so play. It's fun. What are you talking about?"

EG: I hear you. You might belong here...

PM: [laughs] It really feels like that to me, although there's more music business in Nashville. And if you're trying to land a song, well, then that's the town.

EG: I totally agree. I've often said that if you're coming here looking for music business, you're really in the wrong town. Don't pretend that it is, because whatever infrastructure industry is here, it's--

PM: It's puppet theater. And South By Southwest, of course, is the wrong time to fall in love with it, because hey, this isn't really what it's like.

EG: No, it's not. You're right. But if you live here, it's a really fun time of year to see this happen. It always puts a smile on my face to--

PM: Really?

EG: Yeah! I'm not like a grinch--I'm not like a bitch about it because it clogs everything up. I love it! This is what it would be like if we ran the world.

[laughter]

EG: We'd just be like out in the street playing music. I don't know, it's happy town.

PM: Wow, you're really a child of the '60s.

EG: I am. I don't even pretend not to be. I'm proud of our gang. A lot of us are still--we haven't lost our vision yet.

PM: No. Some of our hearing, maybe, but...

EG: Yeah, or sight, but not our vision.

PM: Hablas espanol? [Do you speak Spanish?--I ask because there are indications in her lyrics that perhaps she does.]

EG: Yes, but my daughter speaks it much better.

PM: Ah.

EG: She is fluent. She's also fluent in Portuguese. She's married to a Mexican American, and so her whole in-law side of the family speak strictly Spanish.

PM: Wow.

EG: So they're raising their kids bilingual.

PM: So she speaks fluently, wow.

EG: She's totally fluent. Fast, rapid-fire fluent. And she can speak rapid-fire Portuguese, too.

PM: I would kill for the right Mexican girlfriend, because I could get fluent in a heartbeat.

EG: Yes, that would take you over the top. Because in the home, because of the kids, they speak Spanish in the home because it's very hard to get a kid to come up bilingual when you're in one culture more than the other. Have you met my brother Tony? He's married to a Mexican girl.

PM: No. [But the next day or two, I came upon him paying a casual gig outside--he's a monster guitar player. Check out the video clips of him in this issue.]

EG: They've been together eighteen years. They weren't able to raise their kids bilingual.

PM: I have Tony's record. I got to listen to that, and I'm going to cover that if I can.

EG: He's here in town if you want to find him. He's such a good guy, and such a great player. I'm a huge fan of Tony's.

PM: Wow. And does your son play with you as well?

EG: Cisco plays with me, yeah.

PM: He's a drummer.

EG: Yeah. And he sings with me, too.

PM: I love a family thing.

EG: Well, my daughter sings on the record, too. She sings on "Requiem." That's her. She has that beautiful soprano voice.

PM: Oh, God, that cut is so unbelievable.

EG: Well, she's the one who makes it unbelievable. It was she and I singing this duet. And I wrote it as a duet. But as I was writing I was going, well, shit, I can't even sing this. So I wrote the second part, and I then I knew it had to be her voice. And she was like, "Mom, I can't sing this. It's too hard." I was like, "You can, and you will." And she just sang it so beautifully. There's a purity, an innocence.

PM: What's her name?

EG: Delia.

PM: Oh, yeah, she does a wonderful job on that song, as does her mom.

EG: Thank you.

PM: I mean, the song itself is a major piece.

EG: Well, there's something about that innocent voice and that world-weary voice together--

PM: Ah.

EG: --that I think gave it this--encompassed a range of emotional feel that really got me, too.

PM: Beautifully put. What about the writing of that song? How did that come to be?

EG: Sitting right here on my couch, watching the Tsunami victims with a channel changer. I had a moment of awareness where I realized that I was watching suffering via a channel changer. And it made me sick. I knew I had--I felt that we were disconnected to the suffering, that that's the disease in this country, our disconnect. And it's the nature of our being on an island. It's the nature of seeing everything through a little box, it's the nature of our incredible level of comfort as opposed to the way other people live. But all of those things combined, I felt like I wanted to write something that would be a true vehicle to grieve so that I could hook up with the reality of what other people were experiencing. I wanted it to be a requiem, an old-fashioned almost like a Catholic mass. I'm not Catholic, but I looked at a lot of other deities, too. As you can tell, I'm a deity freak.

PM: Yeah. There is certainly no shortage of them.

EG: But I wanted to invoke the feminine. And I kept coming back to Mary. I thought she's really the archetype of compassion in the West, female archetype of compassion in the West. And I think it goes beyond religion with her, so...

PM: Yeah, me, too. I mean, you hear Mary in a song, and it just kills you.

EG: You know what that is. It's the mother, it's the all-caring compassionate goddess. So, yeah, that's--and I looked at other deities, like Hindu and Muslim deities, but it felt very inappropriate for me to invoke a deity that I culturally wasn't in any way connected to.

PM: Right. And Buddhism really doesn't have exactly the--

EG: They have Mahakala, and they have Avalokiteshavara, who is one of those ones that comes again and again to help human beings through their suffering.

PM: Those are both female deities?

EG: Mahakala is a male deity who has a consort who accompanies him. I can't remember her name. But Avalokiteshavara is female. They actually have quite a number of female deities who have to do with compassionate mother. But once again, I don't know enough about it to feel comfortable invoking them. And they don't sing as well as Mary, either. Let's face it.

PM: Yeah, Avalokiteshavara just doesn't have that [snaps fingers]--

EG: No, it doesn't.

PM: It doesn't roll off the same way.

EG: No. And it really puts you in that New Age prayer chant kind of Yoga music to get a massage to kind of thing.

PM: Right. Enter sitar.

When you say "New Age," that's a period of your work that I don't know at all.

EG: Good.

[laughter]

PM: But I read about you--

EG: Well, I shouldn't divorce myself from a part of my own self-discovery process. But it was sort of shameful in that I think I just didn't have any money, and my production was all--I used drum machines and I used synthesizers because that was all I could afford. But it ended up being very wonky and--although--and I had a lot of belief systems then that I have no idea what I was thinking. [laughs] It was just a process in my path where I had some belief systems that I don't necessarily stand by anymore.

PM: Those periods are amazing where you look back and you think, "Well, I don't know what the hell I was thinking, but I was thinking it."

EG: Yeah, I was just there with that. I really did think that's how things were. And now I'm just mortified that I... But if you look at it, you just see, like so many people of my generation, we tried--we kissed a lot of frogs.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, ain't it the truth? I'm in the habit of asking people, to some artists' true dismay, if they consider themselves a spiritual person. And yet, it seems like you and I have been asking and answering that question since we sat down on the couch.

EG: Yeah. I think most people would agree there's a difference between being a religious person and a spiritual person.

PM: Well, the people that know, would, anyway.

EG: Yeah, right.

PM: But most people--an artist I talked to this morning, he just moaned.

EG: Oh, really? Wow. Well, maybe that's something our generation is comfortable discussing. Who knows?

PM: Yeah, but he was our generation.

[laughter]

EG: That's funny. Well, I have friends who do not consider themselves spiritual or religious, and yet they walk the most ethical path. They have a moral code, and take full responsibility for the lives that they lead, and I think that is a spiritual path.

PM: Absolutely.

EG: And they don't believe in anything. And they would be mortified if someone accused them of that. They're very clear and strongly not into--

PM: Believers, yeah, right.

EG: Yeah. And they don't want call themselves atheists, because they--[laughs] like I have a friend who says, "Why would I want to be part of an organization that is just about not believing something?"

[laughter]

EG: "That seems ridiculous." But I guess I have been a conscious, active seeker. And I can't say that I have answers. [laughs] But I can say that I've quested for a certain amount of self-knowledge and understanding. And that interests me as well as compels me. I'm just that mental kind of makeup of a person that it's better for me to put my mind into why am I here and what does it mean to be a human being on this planet in this time. It's better for me to put my mind to task at those questions than other things like why does she have bigger breasts than I do?

PM: Right.

EG: Because I could go there, too. So I'd rather put my mind to those things. I'd better serve myself.

PM: Are there certain teachers with whom you've aligned yourself in that spiritual way?

EG: Well, I've kissed a lot of frogs in that department, too. I had a kind of new Christian period.

PM: Really?

EG: I had a guru at one point.

PM: Who was that?

EG: The guru Maharaji, the young guy. I took the vows, and I learned the meditation techniques, and I did that, badly, for a few years. And I wrote a lot of songs, sort of

devotional songs during that time period. So, yes, I tried on a lot of different things. But ultimately I find myself aligning with Buddhism more than any of the others because that's sort of nonreligious. It's really just about being alone with one's self, and starting from there, and working backwards into being nothing. [laughs]

PM: And when you do that, is it on the Tibetan side, or the mindfulness side, or the Zen side, or--

EG: I think it's much more about the mindfulness. I'm not into the hierarchy. I mean, there are deities I find interesting, but I'm not a student or I'm not knowledgeable.

PM: You're not into the ritualistic and all that stuff?

EG: No. To me it's about the mindfulness of the moment, acceptance, and also action. I really think that action is part--and that's one of the reasons I've become a political being. I used to be into that sort of passive, whatever happens, it's all good, kind of overview. But I don't feel that way anymore. I believe, for myself, right now, that actually resisting and acting in this world, in the material plane with a body, and trying to work with inertia and matter grows huge muscles. And that interests me.

PM: Yeah, I suddenly want to make a T-shirt that says "It's not all good."

EG: Exactly. I agree. And you look at the Tibetans, and how they're moving around in the world right now. They're political activists. And I think that's of note.

PM: Yeah, His Holiness--

EG: He's a political activist. That's what he is, really, basically.

PM: Sure.

EG: And he's interested in, of course, alleviating human suffering, but he's also mostly interested in freeing his own people.

PM: Right.

EG: He's a nationalist, in that sense. And I think that's interesting.

PM: I love the way you talk about love, in "Borderline," or "I Think About You." It's so nice to hear somebody grown-up talk about love.

EG: Uh-huh, yeah. Well, I'm really good at not having long-term relationships. I'm not good at hanging in somehow. I mean, I try, but I think I have, in the past, picked people who were in for a good four or five years, and then were ready to stop. And I'm sure I had my part to play in all of that.

PM: Doubtless.

EG: I think I have been attracted to non-commitment types [laughs] in the past.

PM: Right.

EG: And so that's been my pattern, anyways. And that says a lot about my inability to commit. [laughs] So I think I'm working on that. I think I've made progress in that.

PM: And besides, I think there's a lot to be said for four or five year relationships.

EG: I think serial monogamy is fine. I think, above all, honest.

PM: Yeah.

EG: I think you can't lose if you are truly honest. I think there's plenty to learn. And I'm okay with four or five year lessons, but I don't like repeating my patterns over and over.

PM: Right.

EG: And I don't like feeling that I'm stuck and haven't made progress. Then I really wonder about it. But I think the best thing for me has been to not be with someone. That's been my best teacher.

PM: Is that the phase you're in?

EG: I've just met someone, and we've been hanging out for six months. And this is a very, very different kind of person, and I think we have great potential to be long-term partners. But it's a completely different scenario. He's not my usual type.

PM: Wow. He's not from the artistic sector?

EG: No. He's a political activist, though.

PM: Ah.

EG: Yeah. We met at a rally. And he's been on a very, very separate journey. I mean, he's younger than I, but I think we see things very similarly. His work really impresses me, but it's not the same work that I do, and I think that's healthy for me.

PM: Yeah. Would you tell me something about that great song, "Is It Like Today?"

EG: I met Karl Wallinger yesterday.

PM: Wow.

EG: Yeah, he had the record. I had to know if he'd heard my version of it. I was so afraid.

PM: So who is he, and where did you find that song?

EG: He's from World Party, a wonderful British--

PM: Oh, he's from World Party.

EG: Yeah, yeah. And he was also in the Water Boys.

PM: Oh.

EG: He's here at SXSW. That would be the best band you'll see this weekend, World Party. I don't know if they're playing somewhere, but if they are, that is the band to see. They were on the radio yesterday. I went to the radio station because I wanted to meet him. I've never met him before.

PM: And did he really like your version?

EG: He said he did, yeah. He recognized me, and I was thrilled. That's like going to see-- that's like [laughs] going to see the Pope or something.

PM: So you'd heard that song on a record, then?

EG: It was on *Bang!* I just think it's an incredible overview of the history of the patriarchy. [laughs]

PM: Yeah.

EG: In a nutshell, he nailed it. And I couldn't do it myself better, so I just went and did his song.

PM: And just musically, melodically speaking, there are turns in melody that are so brilliant.

EG: He's really one of the masters at creating deep, deep lyrics with fabulous pop, memorable melodies, and interesting chord progressions. I mean, that's what I love about him. He's like Ron Sexsmith, or Bruce Cockburn--who's really able to get topical and spiritual, I would say, but without being preachy or non-musical. That's a real art.

PM: And that song, and like Ron's material in particular, I'm really amazed by guys and women who are melodic geniuses.

EG: Yeah, exactly. My dad had a partner in the industry years ago. And I remember when I was just in my early thirties or something, he said, "The real test of a song is after you hear it, can you hum the melody." And it's amazing when you think about it.

PM: It's so old school. It's beautiful.

EG: It's old school philosophy that is really true. I mean, do you just hum the melody? Could you remember it? And I think God, you know, no. A lot of the music that I like today I couldn't sit down and go--after I heard it, I couldn't think of--

PM: Now, that song we're talking about--

EG: Oh!

PM: I don't know that I could hum the melody, but every time it goes by I'm like [gasps] "Oh, God that's good."

EG: I know. It's utterly engaging.

PM: But it's really so tricky that I don't know if I could hum the melody.

EG: Yeah.

PM: But it sure does knock me out every time it goes by.

EG: Yeah, I know. And that chorus, just so simple. And he's really good at those simple choruses that really state the point in four words. Yeah, he's one of the ones I really look up to, because he also, in his production, he sticks with very organic instrumentation. He just piles on the instruments, but they're totally interesting.

PM: I've never asked an artist anything like this in all the interviews that I've done, but maybe you would say something about the recent sad passing of Bob Feldman. [The founder of Red House Records.]

EG: [sighs] Yeah, like everyone, I was completely shocked and not ready for it, because Bob was--talk about old school, he was the guy that got into it like so many of our generation got into it because he just plain loved the music, and he believed in it. And he never lost sight of that. That's what he was like--

PM: Right to the end.

EG: --twenty-five, thirty years later, he still was just in it for one reason, he believed that music could make a difference, and help facilitate transformational events. And that's why he loved me, that's why he wanted me on his label, that's why he stood by me. And I think he was the voice of the conscience for a lot of people who lost sight of their original reason for getting into music. I think he was a reminder--he was almost an annoying

reminder, I think. [laughs] But he was kind of a nudge sometimes, even. But that's where he was at. And when he died I felt, God, I'm going to be without a home again, rudderless. But, amazingly, the label is rallying. They're coming together like a family. And Bob's wife, Beth, is going to be involved now. And she is just a power woman. She's like a goddess. And she's coming on board. And Eric, who was his right-hand guy for all this whole time--

PM: He's a great dude.

EG: --he's as brilliant as Bob was. And so I think the label is going to turn this into a transformational experience and rise to the occasion. So I'm just hanging in. I think it's still a good home for me.

PM: That's fantastic. How far away--well, you said you haven't written a song since *Paradise Hotel*.

EG: I've written one, yeah.

PM: So you're a year away from making another record.

EG: I am, but I actually my latest plan is that next fall I'm going to release a record that is a collection of all my hymns, because I have this series of hymns that I've written since really the '80s, that are all--I call them secular hymns. They're not religious. But they're set up in a sort of hymn-type structure, like "Requiem," or "Land of Milk & Honey," which is on *Milk & Honey*. I set them up--I'm very into Ecclesiastical Anglican church music. I've always loved it. So I've got a dozen of these hymns, and I thought I would release that next season.

PM: That's a great idea.

EG: I think it's timely, it's political, and it's also spiritual in a sense, but it's not religious music. And I think it would be interesting to put them all together. And some of them have never been released before. And some of them I'm going to re-record. And I think it would be cool. That's my next project, actually.

PM: Well, it's kind of you to take the time with me today, and to invite me into your house. I've done over a hundred interviews, but it's very rare--maybe twice--that I've done one in an artist's home.

EG: Really? Ah.

PM: So I'm grateful for this.

EG: Well, I'm glad that you liked being here. Some people don't really notice anything.

PM: It's a beautiful house.

EG: [laughs] Thanks, and thanks for coming.