



## Eliza Gilkyson at "Home"

By Brian D'Ambrosio

Eliza Gilkyson's musical career is proof that when a person does what they love, it's not so much work as it is heeding a calling. At 72, the intimate folk artist and Taos resident has produced more than 20 albums since the 1970s and has another just out, proof that her yearning to write, compose and perform are as enduring as ever.

"When I play, it still feels like I'm flying," Gilkyson said. "I'm completely satisfied. You'll give up every drug if you could keep that feeling. Singing, performing, I'll make lots of sacrifices so that I could still have this."

Born in California, music has always guided Gilkyson's place in the world. Her father, Terry Gilkyson, served as "the center point of all my fundamental love of music," she said, attributing her "musical ear and style" to him. The elder Gilkyson was known for his harmony-driven folk music

and nature-adoring, Western-doting ballads. Terry Gilkyson's friends, composer and producer Van Dyke Parks and his older brother, C. Carson, were Eliza's guitar instructors. Music was an institution in their home, and Terry never seemed too tired to play it or Eliza too tired to hear it.

"There is a photo of my dad and his band rehearsing in Encino (Los Angeles) and my brother was a baby and I must have been 4," Gilkyson said. "I'm sitting at his feet while he was rehearsing. I didn't study him as much as I absorbed him."

Gilkyson also learned from her father that music is a conduit of intimate energy. In a career that spans several decades, a vast reserve of brilliant recordings, as well two Grammy nominations, Gilkyson's intimacy arises from someone who speaks as a person who treasures what she knows.

"Intimacy to me is finding the imagery, the phrasing, and finding the words that give people just enough information to log on to

their imaginations," Gilkyson said. "It's quite cathartic to write something that is intimate and universal, that helps me totally tap into how I feel. The art, though, is to make that universal and not just exclusive of my experience."

Marked by a number of detours and roundabouts, Gilkyson's path to finding a spiritual home in Taos is a microcosm of her development as an artist. She was introduced to the state after several of her aunts began to arrive here from California in the 1950s. One of them even opened a music store.

As a little girl, Gilkyson was transfixed by New Mexico's colorful clay roads and the magical, otherworldly lore of Santa Fe's artisan marketplaces. She was only 2 years old the first summer that she visited, and by the time that she was about 17, her dad had moved to Santa Fe.

Before long, Gilkyson was living in an old wooden boxcar in Lamy, N.M., and leaping into the music scene. At first, she played under her nickname, Lisa, bringing original music to a wide collection of well-known New Mexico hangouts - places like Old Martina's Hall, in Taos, the Mine Shaft Tavern in Madrid, and La Fonda on the Santa Fe Plaza.

At one point, Gilkyson was leading an eight-piece country group, the Turquoise Trail Band, performing a large repertoire of heartbreak, two-step songs. She moved constantly between northern New Mexico, Austin, and Los Angeles. However, by the early 1980s, the songwriting niche that she had been nurturing was losing steam. So, she relocated to Los Angeles only to quickly discover that she was out of her element amid the euphoria of the punk rock movement. Gilkyson moved back to New Mexico, then to Texas again, and then somewhere else.

Music came with desire, she said, but also with grief. Gilkyson had two children to support, and there were times in Austin when she was so insolvent that she



Photo by Rodney Bursiel

couldn't afford a full tank of gas or heat for the home. She took a job answering phones from late at night to early in the morning to help pay for necessities. Success, Gilkyson would learn, would be more the product of perseverance, a willingness to stumble and stand up again and again.

"Every time that I was so heartbroken that I couldn't figure out what else more to do, something would come along that would keep me going," Gilkyson said. "I broke down many times and had to re-invent and re-commit myself. Deciding to quit is part of the process of staying in the game. My goal was never to be famous. My goal was always to be creative."

At 50, Gilkyson committed to full-time touring, buying a well-worn Chevrolet van. She hit the road with her son and another musician, sleeping roadside along the way, or, if the budget allowed, staying in thrifty motels.

"It was so atrocious to start at age 50, touring and taking my 50 bucks or maybe \$100 and just doing it," Gilkyson said. "There was no safety net. But I would have had a hard time rationalizing never having tried. I said, 'If you don't do it now, when you hit 70, you will have a lot of regrets.'"

Gilkyson also started to contemplate the prospect of an anthology of material, distinct timepieces that would reveal the passage and progression of herself as an artist, as well an account of life. That vision was just realized in June with the release of her latest

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