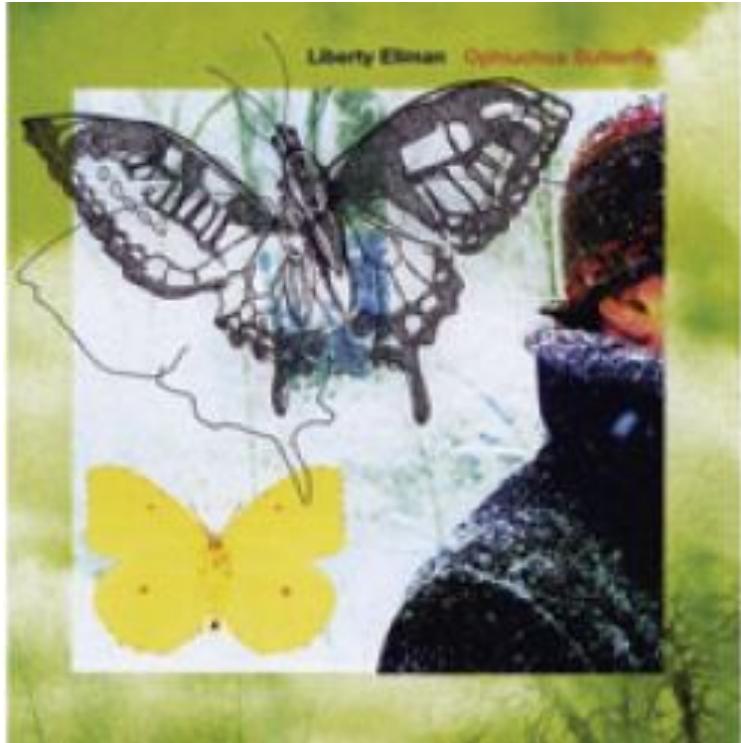


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# Focused on the essentials

## Jazzman Liberty Ellman is no obnoxious hot dog

By René Spencer Saller ([by-author-126-1.html](#))



*Ophiuchus Butterfly* is guitarist/composer Liberty Ellman's second full-length for Pi Recordings, which is fast becoming one of the most interesting labels on the independent jazz scene. (Though it might seem as if no one cares about jazz anymore — at least no one in the mainstream, or even so-called alternative, media — the musicians remain blissfully oblivious to their cultural irrelevance, thank goodness.) Like his labelmates Odyssey and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Ellman is an avant-garde artist who never ventures so far outside that he loses sight of the music's essential soul. There's no skronk for skronk's sake, or what my father-in-law, who approves of all jazz artists up to and including Bix Beiderbecke, likes to call "mindless bleating." Ellman's compositions are cerebral but never difficult, challenging but never exhausting.

Ellman, who also plays in Henry Threadgill's ZOID, is at least as good a bandleader and songwriter as he is a sideman. Although he's certainly capable of playing intricate and technically impressive runs, as he demonstrates on the new CD's title track, he isn't an obnoxious hot dog. In fact, on many of the pieces, he steps back and lets his bandmates — saxophonists Steve Lehman and Mark Shim, tuba player Jose Davila, acoustic bassist Stephan Crump, and drummer Gerald Cleaver — enjoy the spotlight. But a careful listen reveals that he's doing much more

than providing intelligent, understated textures for his

colleagues' solos. The album's 10 original tracks, which range from the experimental, almost electronic-oriented "Snow Lips" and "Pretty Words, Like Blades" to the deliciously languid post-bop blues of "Aestivation" and the intensely chromatic cocktail noir of "You Have Ears," are meticulously arranged and developed. At once highly controlled and recklessly inventive, *Ophiuchus Butterfly* gives the lie to the jazz-is-dead doomsayers while giving the rest of us something to celebrate.

At 75, Ramblin' Jack Elliott has covered quite a bit of ground in his time. Fifty years ago, he cut his first album, *Woody Guthrie's Blues*, and he's been trudging away ever since, opening for the Grateful Dead, winning a Grammy in 1996, and accepting the 1999 National Medal of Arts from President Bill Clinton. With his creaky baritone, eccentric phrasing, and endearingly anachronistic (but never hokey) story songs, Elliott remains Woody's disciple, a living link to the days of boxcar-hopping hobos and moonshine-guzzling rounders. But even though his new album, *I Stand Alone*, finds him revisiting the tried-and-true tropes of folk music — loyal old dogs, faithless lovers, incarcerated losers, tragic train engineers — and alluding to long-dead figures such as Jean Harlow and President James Garfield, Elliott still sounds vital. His voice might be a bit shakier and more phlegm-plagued these days, but his goofball humor and infectious enthusiasm remain intact.

Backing musicians Nels Cline, D.J. Bonebrake, David Hidalgo, and Flea augment Elliott's yeomanly strumming without destroying its bare-bones charm, adding thoughtful touches of Dobro, bass, and drums in just the right proportions. The electrified warble of Corin Tucker (late of Sleater-Kinney) and the alley-cat yowl of Lucinda Williams on the duets "Driving Nails in My Coffin" and "Careless Darling" work amazingly well, even though both women have voices that are every bit as distinctive (or, as their detractors would insist, grating) as Elliott's own. But despite the guests' collective hipness quotient, the collaborations don't come off as a cynical PR ploy, one of those mutual back-scratching sessions in which a crusty old codger earns a Spin blurb as his cred-hungry admirers get an authenticity infusion. Instead, the album sounds like a hootenanny: spontaneous, affectionate, and, most important, just plain fun.