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TOP STORY

## Singer-songwriter Elliah Heifetz is emblematic of Americana's immigrant roots

By [Josh Ewers](#) [Main Street Nashville](#)

Jan 19, 2022



Elliah Heifetz's parents escaped the Soviet Union to gain the hard-earned ground on which their son could seek his future as a singer-songwriter. These days Heifetz is bringing thoughtful prose and meshing in the immigrant mindset to the idea of being an Americana artist.

Courtesy / IVPR

If not for his parents' drive to uproot everything for a better life, Elliah Heifetz's remarkable songwriting voice might have remained muted forever.

“I’m a huge fan and student of American folk music and folk heroes,” said Heifetz, reeling off legendary songwriters and a few fictional figures. “But my mom doing all she did, while she was younger than I am, is about as American folk hero as it gets.”

Though the Soviet Union was in its waning years as the Heifetzes started their family, it was still hard for anything to echo beyond the reach of the Iron Curtain.

That was particularly the case for a Jewish family living in Riga, Latvia, like Heifetz’s mother, her skilled musician husband and their 6-year-old daughter, then an only child.

Anti-Semitism had long been a nasty undercurrent of the empire. It was built into a framework that denied opportunity to those of Jewish identity. With their young one reaching school age, the family opted to pull back the curtain.

“It was pretty clear that, as a Jew in Soviet Latvia, a lot of opportunities were not going to be afforded to her,” Heifetz said. “It was the same with my dad, who was on the rise as a classical musician. He was essentially denied access to the top conservatory in the Soviet Union pretty explicitly because he was a Jew. A lot of different things were off the table.”

With the aid of an overseas organization and long-lost family members in the United States, the Heifetzes were among those Jewish immigrants who were, after several years of legwork, granted passage out of the Soviet Union to seek a more equitable life.

But they’d have to build from the ground up.

They arrived to a Little Russia neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia. It was a

place Heifetz describes as “more concrete than you’ve ever seen,” dotted by Cyrillic Russian billboards and rampant with scammers. There, his mother earned a tiny income despite her programming skills.

“They showed up to the States with literally \$20,” Heifetz explained. “My sister’s first birthday cake in the United States was a Dunkin’ doughnut, Boston cream, with little candles stuck in it.”

It’s into that world of tiny, dusty apartments Heifetz was born three years after his parents’ exodus. Despite its misgivings, later in life, Heifetz would grow to appreciate the place in his own way.

Still, by the time he was 3, his parents would be stable enough to move the family to a Philadelphia suburb, where his heritage as a fifth-generation musician was fostered.

“They never really had the choice not to be musicians and so my parents were pretty intent on me having the choice not to be,” Heifetz explained. “In many ways, I was raised to want to be anything but a musician and so I did spend most of my life not thinking being a musician was even in the cards for me.”

Despite the mindset, he’d been dealt a musician’s hand.

“But of course I was the biggest music fan of anybody I knew ... to, like, a really embarrassingly, dirty level,” Heifetz said with a laugh. “And my dad did teach me how to play piano and a lot of really fundamental things about music.

“He just thought he was making me a better listener, someone who could appreciate what he does, this thing that he loves, but accidentally, I think it seeded it some things.”

His first love as a kid was country and folk music, an unexpected choice for a first-generation American. He was spurred on in his earliest years by moments like “O Brother, Where Art Thou”; his favorite Beatles song, the country-fried “I’ve Just Seen a Face”; and even the Roger Miller musical “Big River.”

Aside from just liking the sounds, country also made for an attractive idea to a young immigrant kid like Heifetz who wanted to belong.

He was a kid who found classmates put off by his family’s fridge keeping a bunch of foreign food they thought smelled weird. And they were the kids of parents whom Heifetz frequently overheard making fun of his own parents’ accents.

“When I was little playing Cowboys and Outlaws, you have the names, right? ‘Billy the Kid’ or whatever. It was really hard to do that with Elliah,” Heifetz said. “So I felt like there was this sort of like the mythos of, like, Americana as just a general concept of cowboys, country music and things that came from the heartland. These are all just words and concepts that I now know are big generalizations.”

One way or another, Heifetz gravitated to the sounds.

“Listening to folk, country and old-time music was very much the definition of a guilty pleasure,” he said. “It felt like I shouldn’t be doing this. This isn’t for me.”

But it was.

Heifetz was born on a strange frontier in a town he had mixed feelings about, poor as can be, among a hardworking, blue-collar family looked down upon by their mainstream peers. He’d learned musical ideas from his father, notions handed down over generations. And he was inspired to write songs about it all.

He'd had as country an upbringing as anyone.

It's an identity crisis he'd come to grips with in 2017 as the Trump administration made those trying to cross the border from Mexico part of a vilifying rallying cry.

"It made me want to just understand my own place with this music, try to understand why I had kept myself from taking it on fully," Heifetz said of starting to research the genres. "It became clear within two seconds that country music and Americana music, folk music, are just the results of a million different immigrant cultures, of musics all interacting. It's more often coming from an immigrant culture than it is not."

It's an idea that Heifetz embraces on his debut album, "First Generation American," an album recorded in Nashville and produced by Grammy nominee and fellow first-generation American Andrija Tokic.

When it arrives April 1, the album will feature Heifetz's many stories, warmly told soft and slow via an intimate grasp of lovingly crafted and nuanced prose that paints vivid pictures of his upbringing, sly wisdom and worldly perspective.

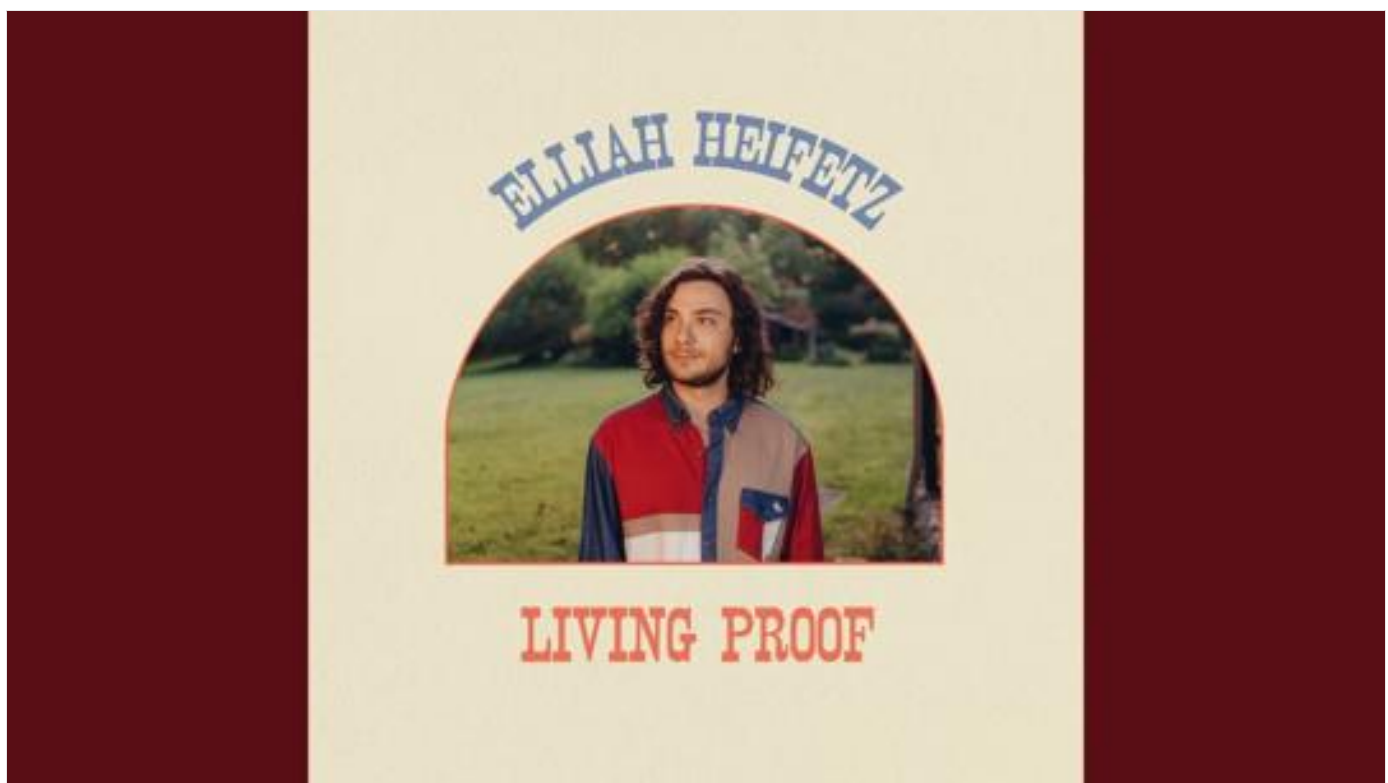
"I think it's like the way that when I listen to John Prine, even on record, I feel like there's like a friend in the room. It's just like he has his hand on my shoulder, is telling me a funny story that is gonna kill me with laughter and just made my day a little better," Heifetz said of what he loves about making music.

"That is the energy that I really strive toward having when I get up to perform. I just want to be able to have a group of people feel comfortable with me."

If the stories of Heifetz's parents are any indication of his own future, he'll soon be pulling back his own curtain to the world when "First Generation American"

is released.

”It’s the immigrant mentality. I credit the entirety of everything that I’ve ever done right in my life to the way my parents raised me to be when I was younger,” Heifetz said. “Which is, if you want something, you have to go get it. They’re always saying funny things like, ‘We’re immigrants, we don’t get to be bored or tired.’ Nothing is just going to be handed to you really ever, and it’s OK to want something and have big dreams, but you better go get it.”



**'Living Proof' - Elliah Heifetz**

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