

DECEMBER 2007

Blues ART Journal

Eleanor Ellis: Way Back Blues

by Larry Benicewicz

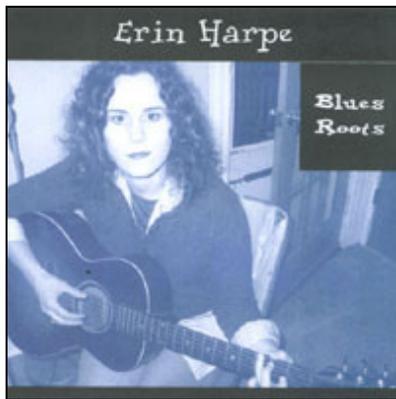


Photocopyright by Larry B.

Archie Edwards & John Jackson, 1990

I've known about **Eleanor Ellis**, the preeminent female acoustic blues guitarist of the Mid-Atlantic region for quite some time, having written a piece about her nearly fifteen years ago in *Maryland Musician* magazine, now called the *Music Monthly*. I was always impressed with her musicianship, but even back then I was equally affected by her efforts to preserve traditional blues, to keep it alive for posterity. This she accomplished in many ways, as, of course, a player, but also as writer, archivist, filmmaker, and co-founder in 1987 of the DC Blues Society. She always went about her work behind the scenes without fanfare as if it were her sacred duty. When I asked for that first interview, she modestly inquired of me why I was making such a fuss as if such endeavors were the normal activities of blues lovers.

Well, things haven't really changed much in the intervening years. Eleanor remains a somewhat obscure and enigmatic figure, working diligently as both performer and historian to save area blues shrine - the Alpha Tonsorial Barbershop at 2007 Bunker Hill Road in N.E. Washington, D.C., where Piedmont guitar wizard and former mentor, **Archie Edwards**, held court for many years until his death in 1998. But as to whether or not Eleanor wants to come out of the shadows and share the spotlight of local luminaries, she may not have a choice, since her brand new CD is just that remarkable to officially put her on the map (more about that later).



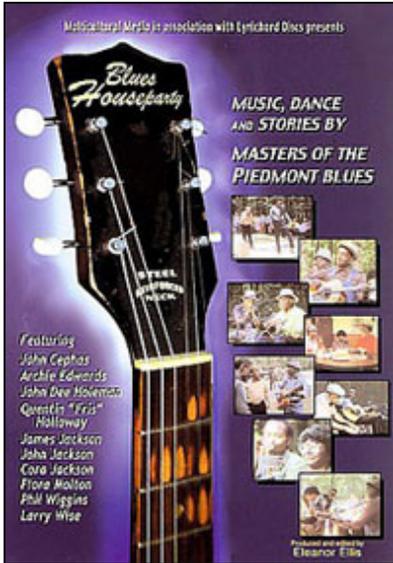
Eleanor Ellis & Eugene Powell, King Biscuit Festival, Helena, AK, Photo: Axel Küstner

Despite the fact that Eleanor is reticent to volunteer information about her past, perhaps dismissing it as inconsequential, she has a most interesting biography to relate; that is, once someone can elicit the details.



Filming of Blues House Party, 1985, Standing L-R, Larry Wise, Eleanor Ellis, Archie Edwards, Flora Molton, John Cephas, Quentin "Fris" Holloway, John Jackson, Cora Jackson, Phil Wiggins Kneeling - John Dee Holeman and James Jackson, Photo: unknown

I knew Eleanor wasn't from these parts because she has retained a lilting, soft, in fact, rather charming Southern accent, but I should have guessed that she was from Louisiana because she was so conversant with so many genres of music that coexist there, be it jazz, blues, country, zydeco, Cajun, or swamp pop. There is absolutely no other state in the nation which can claim to have given birth to a more diverse lot of musical idioms. Although born in New Orleans, she was raised in the small town of Amite about a dozen miles north of Hammond. Her first music of choice was actually C&W but later it was the blues that she heard over the 50,000 watt clear channel of Nashville's WLAC. Pioneering white DJ's like John R (Richbourg), Gene Nobles, and Bill "Hoss" Allen, sponsored by entrepreneurs like Randy Wood of Randy's Records in Gallatin, TN, and Ernie Young of Ernie's Record Mart in the Music City, would plug R&B tunes over the airwaves which could then be purchased via mail order. So, after hearing artists nightly over the radio such as Excello's (Young's label) Lightnin' Slim, Slim Harpo, Lazy Lester, and Lonesome Sundown, it wasn't long before Eleanor was beseeching her parents for a guitar with which she could emulate her new found heroes. Upon the receipt of this instrument, however, she found that the music did not come as easily as expected. "I must admit that I didn't know the first thing about it," she said.



It wasn't until the early 70s by which time she was back in New Orleans that she seriously considered improving her guitar method to the point of performing. She heard that a mandolin player, Hazel Schlueter, was arranging bluegrass jam sessions at an experimental free school, which her son attended. Both she and Hazel, who immediately struck up a friendship, were contemporaries and evidently at the same stage of development so that they were not hesitant to share whatever expertise they

During the late 70s, she struggled to establish herself in this new territory, and, for the most part, was successful at earning a living as a musician, although she fondly recalls, in order to make ends meet, having to wash dishes as well as dispatch her acoustic sets at Food For Thought, also on Connecticut Ave. During this period, she also performed at Smokey's, a popular acoustic club in Takoma Park, where she subsequently solidified more than a few professional relationships with local entertainers, including guitarist David Goodfriend, who later fronted the group, Going, Going, Gone. As the 80s dawned, Eleanor developed an inclination to travel and made a prolonged foray into New England where she played in Northampton, MA, Portsmouth, NH, and even Vermont. By this time, she was adding many blues numbers to her already eclectic play list and saw fit to include them in her engagements whenever she deemed appropriate. She explained this new departure rather succinctly: "As your life changes, what's relevant to your life will change your repertoire." Not long after this extended excursion, she decided to take a hiatus from music altogether, citing a condition akin to burn-out.



L-R, Eleanor Ellis, Precious Bryant, Tony Bryant, 1990s. Photo: Alice Harp

Having at least temporarily "dropped out of the music scene" (to use her expression), she decided to seek other opportunities, including working as a production assistant for made-for-television movies. This occupation in turn led to her passion for video. Although she had no prior experience in this field, she was determined to learn all its aspects in order to become familiar with the creative process of, especially, documentaries. Thus, she totally immersed herself in this endeavor, often as merely an observer during other film shoots. "I started doing some projects with the Takoma Park Public Access and got a job with a small production house where I taught skills like film editing," she said. Quite fortuitously in Eleanor's case, the same building housed the offices of the NCTA (National Council of Traditional Arts), which was then headed by none other than the producer, Joe Wilson, (on Flying Fish) of famed Piedmont picker John Cephas and harp player Phil Wiggins.

She by chance encountered Joe in the hall one day and he explained that he had a lot of footage that he had amassed from the various National Folk Festivals at Wolftrap, VA, which were supported by grants from his organization. Wilson suggested that she convert these unedited frames into a linear film record. She gladly accepted this daunting chore but unfortunately, after closer scrutiny, she discovered that the overall quality of the tape left much to be desired.

When she next met Joe and confronted him with the bad news, he instead recommended that she begin a whole new undertaking - a documentary on his favorite subjects - Cephas and Wiggins. After a skull session, both parties finally agreed to expand the project to include all the Piedmont legends, including John Jackson, Archie Edwards, and John Dee Holeman. And what could be a better setting to candidly capture these characters in their element than during an old-fashioned country cook-out and hoe-down? Thus, the idea which would see its fruition in *Blues House Party* was born. And its locale was the rural Fairfax, VA, retreat of John Jackson.

Eleanor Ellis assumed the role of producer and editor for this documentary, *Blues House Party*, and she enlisted the services of several advisors, including Joe Wilson, Dr. Barry Pearson of the University of Maryland, who had written a biography of two of the principals (Edwards and Cephas), and Dr. Bill Barlow of Howard University and longtime host of its radio show over WPFW, Blue Monday. Though shot in one day in 1985, it proved to be years in the making, in fact, a labor of love for Eleanor to finish the task, which not only involved the technical components of reducing all the takes into a coherent, fluid movie but also soliciting for grants to cover the funding for such essentials as acquiring copyrights to the many songs which were utilized throughout the filming. Finally in 1989, she presented it before the Folklore Society of Greater Washington at the Washington Ethical Society where it garnered rave reviews. On that night's program also were both John Jackson and Archie Edwards, who each performed his brand of Piedmont blues. To say the least, the evening was quite a personal triumph for Eleanor even though she downplays its significance.



photo: Julie Wiatt

ELEANOR ELLIS

P.O. Box 5466
Takoma Park, MD 20912-0466

Eleanor Ellis, first cassette cover,
Photo: Julie Wiatt



L-R, Eleanor Ellis, Big Boy Henry, Lightnin' Wells, 2002, North Carolina, Photo: Axel Küstner

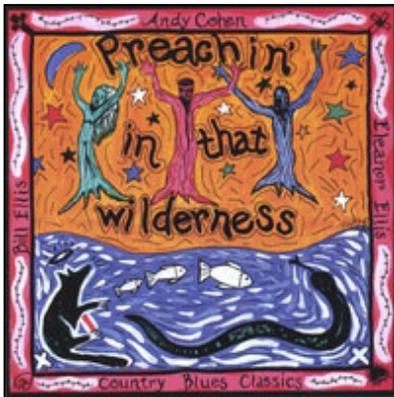
Perhaps it was this involvement in *Blues House Party* that rekindled her desire to play on a regular basis, because her reemergence as a musician coincided with her initial attempts in this venture. Whatever the reason, she did remember a particularly inciting incident in this time frame. There was a festival organized by Myron Samuels of the Parks Service at Oxon Hill Farm in 1985 in which Eleanor had to chauffeur two of the participants, harp player, Larry Wise, and the matriarch of Washington blues, guitarist Flora Molton. On her way home, Flora asked Eleanor if she would take the place of her recently departed, longtime accompanist, Ed Morris. Eleanor was both flattered and amused by the proposition offered by this colorful and outspoken octogenarian. But she again was up to

the challenge. "You see, Flora was kind of limited as a musician. She invariably played with a slide in open D tuning with no chord changes. And she was hard to follow because she had her own sense of time," confessed Eleanor. Flora did possess old tapes of Ed Morris which Eleanor learned by rote and this made the transition easier.

Soon this trio became very visible in the area (especially at Flora's regular haunt at the corner of 11th St and F St, NW, beside the display window of Woodward & Lothrop). When Larry quit the group after a spell, he was replaced by Archie Edwards. But whatever its configuration, the reputation of the outfit eventually secured them gigs outside of the Mid-Atlantic region and they traveled to festivals in upstate New York and Kent State in Ohio. This partnership lasted for several years until Flora's death in 1990.



L-R, Eleanor Ellis, J.W. Warren, Arifton, AL, 1993, Photo: Axel Küstner



Oxon Hill Farm Blues Festival, 1983, Standing L-R, Eleanor Ellis, John Cephas, John Jackson, Eric King, Roger Gregory, Roy Dunn, James Jackson, Flora Molton, Larry Wise, Phil Wiggins
Kneeling: unknown Photo: Myron Samuels

In the company of Flora and Archie, Eleanor first went overseas in 1987 in a tour booked by blues impresario, **Rolf Schubert**, of Köln (Cologne), Germany. The itinerary included concerts in Germany, Holland, France, and England. During the French leg of the journey, they performed at Avignon (on the Rhone) where the theme of the festival was "Rivers of the World." Ironically, this same threesome represented the Mississippi. Later in 1990, Eleanor made yet another visit to France playing along the route with the late Delta guitarist and vocalist, Jessie Mae Hemphill.



**Oxon Hill Farm Blues Festival, 1983, Standing L-R, Eleanor Ellis, John Cephas, John Jackson, Eric King, Roger Gregory, Roy Dunn, James Jackson, Flora Molton, Larry Wise, Phil Wiggins
Kneeling: unknown Photo: Myron Samuels**

One connection which proved to be significant in her growth as an artist was made during this first junket abroad - meeting up with German talent scout/photographer/ promoter, **Axel Küstner**, who in 1979 paid a call to

Archie's barbershop and first recorded the Piedmont great there - *Living Country Blues, Volume 6: The Road Is Rough and Rocky* - a vinyl LP which was released in Germany. Küstner was always interested in making no frills, primitive field recordings, particularly of unrenowned bluesmen, like Archie Edwards, and later in the 90s would often invite Eleanor along during these prodigious taping sessions, which included stops in Greenville, MS, to visit Eugene Powell, Bentonia, MS, for Jack Owens, and to Ariton, AL, for J.W. Warren, just to name a few. Household names these figures were not but Eleanor learned a lot from them. "I can't give Axel enough credit for introducing me to these bluesmen. I had the best of both worlds. Not only was I surrounded at home by such great Piedmont players [Jackson, Edwards, Cephas] but also I had the privilege to assimilate a lot of technique from these old timers who all played in their own idiosyncratic style. Let's say I got a well rounded education," she said.



**Green Valley Cutups, New Orleans, 1975
L-R back row: Luke Thompson, Jerry ?, Eleanor Ellis
front row; L-R Jim Huey, Bruce Daigrepoint
Photo: Jim Huey**

If playing were not enough, Eleanor during this time frame was also distinguishing herself as a writer, contributing biographies to prestigious blues publications such as *Sing Out* and *Living Blues* (Flora Molton) and *Blues Review* in which she recounted the stories of no less than four distinguished bluesmen - Jesse Thomas, Henry Townsend, Paul Rishell, and John Mooney.

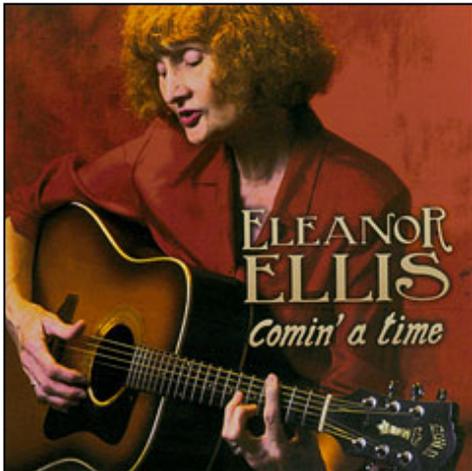
Although Eleanor seemed reluctant to pursue a recording career, she by 1987 realized the necessity of putting together an album which, if nothing else, would serve as a calling card. The resulting eponymous cassette, recorded at American University, ably demonstrated her familiarity with a wide range of traditional material by venerable blues artists such as Furry Lewis, Robert Wilkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Memphis Minnie. In 1993, she along with guitarist Bill Ellis and pianist/guitarist Andy Cohen released *Preachin' In*

That Wilderness, another cassette on the folk-oriented Marimac label (Cephas & Wiggins, Bruce Hutton) which has since been reissued on Riverlark as a CD. Over the years, she has also been a part of many compilations and anthologies. Among her notable recorded sides are appearances on the *Sister Fire: Music by Women* LP, marking the 25th anniversary of the Kent State Folk Festival and Flora Molton's *I Want To Be Ready To Hear God When He Calls*, a collection of songs on the Lively Stone label produced and promoted by Michael Licht (Dr. Harp) of the D.C. Commission of the Arts. In 2000, Eleanor sang a duet, Memphis Minnie's "What's The Matter with the Mill," with Neil Harpe on a CD, *Archie Edwards Blues Foundation*. Most recently (2006), Eleanor donates one track, "Trouble I Once Knew," to the CD, *Songs of Peace & Forgiveness*, on the Peace Evolutions label, another benefit recording for the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation. Other contributors to this last project include guitarist Mike Baytop, Phil Wiggins, and Gaye Adegbalola of Safire. Furthermore, you can now view Eleanor in concert by consulting YouTube.

As far as public appearances go, besides Europe, Eleanor has been literally all over the states and Canada, including several invitations at her hometown JazzFest. Other noted venues include the 1994 King Biscuit Festival in Helena, AR (with Eugene Powell), Pete Seeger's Clearwater's Hudson River Festival, the Kent State Folk Festival, the Du Maurier International Jazz Festival in Toronto, the Home County Folk Festival in London, Ontario, the Cornell University "Blues Traditions" series, and the Old Songs Festival in Vorheesville (near Albany) in upstate New York. Locally, she has performed at the Takoma Park and Greenbelt Festivals and the Washington Folk Festival. As a member of the loose aggregate, the Archie Edwards Barbershop Players, she has played this past year at both Baltimore's city celebration, Artscape, and the annual Baltimore Blues Society sponsored Alonzo's Picnic during the Labor Day weekend (her second in recent memory).



Eugene Powell's House, Greenville, MS, 1992,
L-R—Eleanor Ellis, Axel Kustner, Eugene Powell, Lois Powell, Laurie Lawson,
Photo: Axel Küstner



Eleanor Ellis, recent CD cover,
Photo: Michael Stewart

“It seems that I’ve been out and about quite a bit of late and even have added a new twist to supplement my income - teaching guitar,” she said. Aside from taking a turn at Archie’s barbershop which on occasion doubles as a schoolhouse for guitar training, Eleanor has this past year been chosen as an instructor in the rudiments of the folk guitar at the week long Centrum festival in Port Townsend, WA, and hopes to continue in this capacity at the 2008 Augusta Heritage Days jamboree held at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, WV. “It would be nice to be able to get back to completely supporting myself as musician. I’m hoping that this new album will do the trick,” she added.

But if it doesn’t, it won’t be for lack of trying. Everything about ***Comin’ a time*** (Patuxent CD 138), which was officially released on November 9, was done right. First, since Eleanor is an acoustic player, she’s allowed to strut her stuff in an environment wherein she feels most comfortable---playing solo or with a minimum of accompaniment. And when it’s provided, it’s executed most sympathetically by friends in the Archie Edwards Barbershop Players, including Neil Harpe on guitar and vocals, Mike Baytop on harp and guitar, Jay Summerour (who also with Warner Williams forms Little Bit a Blues) on harp, Phil Wiggins on harp, and the late Richard Thomas on his percussive trademark bones, the latter on the only non-studio cut, Sleepy John Estes’s “Diving Duck.” Other contributors include pianists Judy Luis-Watson and Joe Bailes, Pearl Bailes on harp, and Thomas Cox on bass.

Make no mistake about it. This is Eleanor Ellis’s CD and she’s presented front and center, not buried in the mix. Exquisitely recorded by engineer John Escobar at Patuxent Music in Rockville, he not only captures the nuances of her vocals but also the essence of her crisp and clean playing throughout the remaining 17 tracks, the sheer number of which, by the way, are a lot of bang for the buck in today’s disposal sound bite age. But how else can you do justice to a long life in music if you can’t present the full range of material which comprises the repertoire of an artist of her stature?

“I’ve listened to a lot of guitarists and singers over the years and I’ve absorbed quite a bit, but I’d like to think that what I’ve taken from them I have made into something else uniquely my own,” said Eleanor, who has included in *Comin’ a time* her interpretations (as well as commentary in the liner notes) of the signature songs of many of her revered legends, including “Cypress Grove” and “Special Rider” by Skip James, “Wonder Where My Easy Rider’s Gone” by Mance Lipscomb, “Big Road Blues” by Tommy Johnson, “Sun’s Gonna Shine One Day” by Flora Molton, and no less than three classics by Memphis Minnie - “Me And My Chauffeur,” “In My Girlish Days,” and the rousing number which concludes the CD, “What’s the Matter With the Mill?” But there are some surprises as well that Eleanor has unearthed, like hitherto unnoticed nuggets - Lottie Kimbrough’s “Goin’ Away Blues,” Hezekiah Jenkins’s “The Panic Is On,” and Henry Thomas’s “Texas Easy Street Blues.” Eleanor even transforms the first song on the CD, Mississippi John Hurt’s “Take Me Back Baby,” giving it a country and western flavor.

If it's acoustic country blues you seek, there's no need to look any farther because *Comin' a time* covers all the bases of traditional blues from Delta to Piedmont to ragtime and there's no better representative around to really deliver the goods like Eleanor Ellis, who's journeyed to some far off outposts to hear it from the original sources. Now that these old masters are just about all gone, let's be grateful that someone like Eleanor Ellis cares enough to keep these treasures around for you. ***Comin' a time*** will then serve as your passport to the past, your portable time machine to the birth of the blues. And believe me, you'll enjoy the voyage.

----**Larry Benicewicz**, *Baltimore Blues Society*

Comin' a time is available at www.CDBaby.com and through Patuxent Music, PO Box 572, Rockville, MD, 20848

eleanor ellis

Eleanor Ellis, blues singer and guitarist, will be coming to Britain this October to play four gigs in the London area for the first time since 1987.

A native of Louisiana and now a resident of Maryland, Ellis's musical influences include the blues players she has known personally as well as early blues greats like Memphis Minnie and Mississippi John Hurt. She has developed a distinctive and personal approach to the music, and has played at festivals, concerts and clubs throughout the United States, in Canada and in Europe. According to one reviewer, "More than copying one artist or another, Ellis distils the elements of the originals and transmits them intact, in her own expressive way." She was recently nominated by the Washington Area Music Association for Best Female Blues Vocalist and her most recent CD, *Comin' a Time* on the Patuxent label, was nominated for Best New Blues CD of 2007. This CD, available from www.cdbaby.com, was also chosen for heavy rotation on XM Satellite radio's Pick to Click.

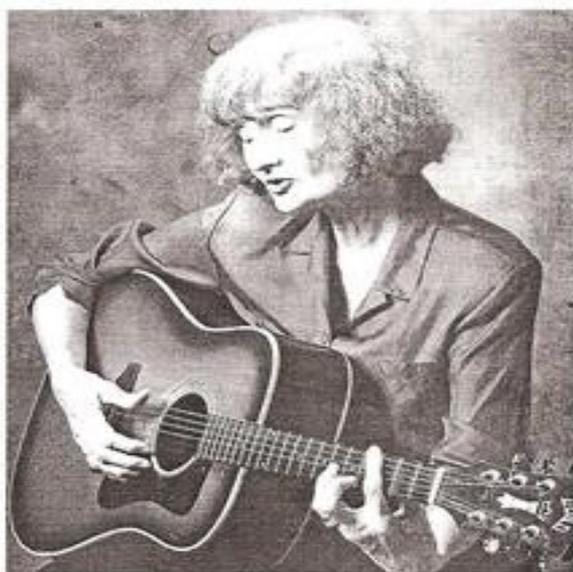
Ellis has a long involvement with the US blues scene. She travelled and played with the late Gospel street singer Flora Molton, was a regular at the Saturday afternoon barbershop blues jams of Piedmont bluesman Archie Edwards, and sometimes accompanied Delta blues great Eugene Powell down in Greenville Mississippi. She is a founding member of the D.C. Blues Society and the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, has written about the blues for several publications, teaches guitar, and is producer and editor of the video documentary *Blues Houseparty*, which features well-known Piedmont blues musicians such as John Jackson, John Cephas, and Archie Edwards. She also worked at the Archive of New Orleans Jazz at Tulane University in New Orleans, and at the New Orleans Jazz Museum. - Anne Rosenberg

Eleanor Ellis writes: This year started on a sad note, with the sale and closing of the Archie Edwards blues barbershop after almost fifty years of operation. When Piedmont blues musician Archie Edwards was alive, he'd close down his barbershop on Saturday afternoons and we would drop by to, as Archie put it, "drink a few beers, play a little music, and tell a few lies." After Archie's death in 1998 a handful of regulars got together to keep the barbershop open and continue Archie's tradition of weekly jams and spreading the gospel of the blues. We managed to do that, and eventually these jams grew into a

large musical community made up of people from all walks of life: music-obsessed attorney for the U.S. Justice Department who took his resonator guitar to work and practised in his office (not particularly quietly) every chance he got; an impassioned blues-singing woman who is also a Methodist minister; an actor in a weekly TV series; a federal employee who made wooden 'bones' on his lunch hour, sitting alone in a cloud of flying sawdust; a harmonica-crazed man of 86 who discovered the joys of playing blues harp at the age of 85; a woman with a lovely voice and stage presence who is also a judge. But mostly you never knew or cared what someone did in 'real life' because the important thing was the friendship and the music which brought us all together. I think we will eventually find another home, but it can never take the place of the original barbershop.

In March, I opened for Buddy Guy at The Birchmere, a well know local club. At the end of April, Lightnin' Wells (long-time musician friend from North Carolina) and I played at a festival at Lutherhaus in Osnabruck, Germany along with, among others, Robert B. Jones from Detroit, Michael Roach, and the Down Home Percolators (Klaus "Mojo" Killian, harp and Bernd Simon, guitar). Lightnin' and I also did a gig with Mojo and Bernd at the Jazzkeller in Frankfurt. We then went to Bad Gandersheim to stay with blues photographer Axel Kustner and do a series of gigs sharing the bill with Front Porch Picking, a multi-talented German group of six really nice guys. Axel's place is overflowing with 78 (rpm) records, LPs, CDs, books, photos, a collection of hot-sauce bottles, front pages from some of the more outlandish U.S. weeklies plastered on the walls ("half-man half-bat discovered in Vermont. Scientists say he's smart as a whip") and other interesting things. It was fun to have access to all that, but you had to be real careful not to stumble over the piles of rare 78s stacked on the floor.

In June, I learned several songs from the traditions of Southwest Virginia for a show at a rural museum which featured the blues of that area, sharing the gig with John Jackson's nephew



Jeff Scott, Michael Baytop, Gregg Kimball, and Cheryl Wheeler. The Old Songs Festival in upstate New York was at the end of June: I taught an introduction to Piedmont blues guitar and Ron Gordon, Norbert Hebert and I were in charge of the kids' jugband (adults allowed), which performed on the Sunday afternoon show. Mid-July I taught guitar at Augusta Blues Week in Elkins West Virginia, and a week later I was in Port Townsend in beautiful Washington state to teach guitar at Centrum's Blues Week and hang out a bit with the Weenie Campbell contingent (www.weeniecampbell.com check them out).

Those are a few of the highlights of my musical year so far. The first part of October, I'll be doing some gigs in France, thanks to my friend and fellow musician Karim Albert Kook. Tony and Ann from Brooks Blues Bar have invited me to England again for the first time since I was there with Gospel streetsinger Flora Molton, in 1987, for a short tour. I look forward to it!

Eleanor Ellis tours with guitarist **Simon Prager**, with appearances from **Kevin Stenson** on harmonica
October tour dates: 16th Ram Jam Club at The Grey Horse, Kingston Upon Thames KT2 2EE; 17th Brooks Blues Bar, The Telegraph, Putney Heath London SW15 3TU; 18th Oliver's Bar, Greenwich London SE10 9UL; 19th The Oval Tavern, Croydon CR0 6BR.

www.eleanorellis.com

Making Music & Magic at Centrum

Roy Brown

I woke up one mornin' and found egg on my face. Yes I woke up one mornin', and found egg all over my face. I shoulda known about it, but I didn't know nothin' 'bout that Centrum place ...

The music running through my head as I write is familiar, but looking at the tired lines, maybe I need a writer's workshop. Now I know where to find one; there's also workshops on fiddle tunes, jazz, country blues, and even workshops for kids learning about the sea. There is a place south of the Mason Dixon you could go or better yet, take a short ferry ride and drive to Centrum at Fort Worden State Park in Port Townsend.

I talked with Peter McCracken, program manager for the week-long Country Blues Workshop and Festival. Centrum was formed to provide an artist-directed arts program. The first sponsors included the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State Parks, and the Washington State Arts Commission. Fort Worden became a state park to house the new program in 1973. Centrum should be thought of as an umbrella organization that provides, in McCracken's words, "a basic concept, putting aspiring artists and master artists in a beautiful place together, and then getting out of the way."

For each workshop, there is an Artistic Director who flavors each workshop and is responsible for the teaching staff. The participants pay a fee and are housed at Fort Worden. Each day is filled with morning and afternoon learning sessions that the participants choose according to their own needs. Blues guitar, harp and vocal are the most popular classes, but that isn't where all the teaching and learning occurs.

There are impromptu jam sessions each night that run well into the wee hours where teachers and participants alike get together to make a little music. Here teachers teach students AND students teach teachers. Remember McCracken's earlier words about put 'em together and get out of the way? Later in the week, festival staff organize a participant concert where everyone can take the stage for one song. That night, there must have been 60 or 70 names on the list. The quality ranged from beginner to professional, and the bonding was so complete during the week that even the least able and most frightened by the experience received treatment like Muddy reincarnate as the musician left the stage.

One of the teachers I met was Eleanor Ellis from Takoma

Park, MD (eleanordellis@yahoo.com). My sister, Myrna Bostwick, and I went to Port Townsend to learn about with this incredible advocate for the arts that is Centrum. We also brought a booth for the concert events on Friday and Saturday to sell some blues gear and educate Centrum participants about WBS. Peter McCracken put us up in former housing for NCO-grade soldiers. There were two bedrooms in this 1930's two story house, and Eleanor was housed in the other room. How better to learn than from one of the teachers?

I asked Eleanor about the Artistic Director position, who is responsible for the staff.

"During his tenure as Artistic Director," Ellis said, "Phil Wiggins made a point of bringing in new people to teach at Centrum." According to McCracken, "the Artistic Director develops a vision for the program and invites players (and sometimes others) to support that vision. It is the Program Manager's job to implement the A.D.'s vision."



Eleanor Ellis teaching at Centrum
Photo: Rosalyn Powell

Friday morning Myrna and I set off for a little blues education. Our first stop was Eleanor's Piedmont Blues guitar workshop. The first thing we noticed was her excellent educational presentation. Eleanor talked about the subject, held her guitar high so the participants could see what she was doing on the frets, made sure everyone was on the same page, and then demonstrated. Finally, she would invite the students

to play along with her. Eleanor picked out an obvious singing talent and invited her to sing the song that she was teaching. I asked Ellis about her own education as a player and a teacher.

"The way I teach guitar is based on the way I learned guitar," she said. "I don't have formal training or a music degree. I learned to play by listening, watching and learning from other people. I learned by putting in lots of practice time and discovering things by myself. I try to teach in such a way that people have a foundation from which to continue learning, practicing and exploring the music once Blues Week is over."

She put her lessons into context, talked about history and traditions, and was never short on stories. All this is the essence of a master teacher, which Eleanor is. Phil Wiggins of Cephas and Wiggins (www.cephasandwiggins.net) recruited Eleanor for the Country Blues Faculty.

Centrum has a solid financial base funded in part from registration and ticket sales (59%), grants and foundations (11%), and from individual donors (30%). Over