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Blues ART Journal

Eleanor Ellis: Way Back Blues

by Larry Benicewicz

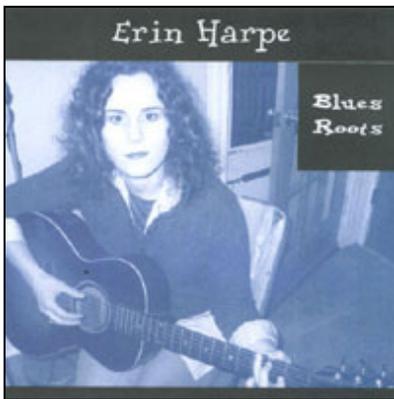


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Archie Edwards & John Jackson, 1990

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).

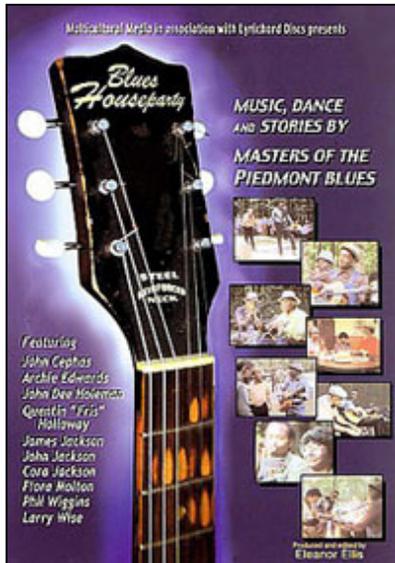


Eleanor Ellis & Eugene Powell, King Biscuit Festival, Helena, AK, Photo: Axel Küstner

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



knew between them. It was in this manner that Eleanor grew proficient in two-part harmony and flat picking. Hazel, by the way, goes by the name "Delta Rambler" and to this day hosts a show over WWOZ. "We were a duo and I tried to sing like Ralph Stanley of the Stanley Brothers, but not doing well at it, at least not in the beginning," confessed Eleanor.

Apparently, someone else thought otherwise, as she was scouted and then soon recruited by the bluegrass band, Green Valley Cut-Ups, which was founded by Luke Thompson. Since the band already had a competent guitarist, Luke persuaded Eleanor to instead take up the double bass. This contingent, which also included a banjo player, the underage Bruce Daigrepoint (now renowned for his Cajun diatonic accordion), dressed in matching outfits and had a regular Sunday gig at the hallowed uptown blues club, the Maple Leaf, still flourishing on Oak St. off Carrolltown Ave. Often taking to the streets in this group, Eleanor recalled making many lifelong friends and acquaintances in this circuit, especially during Mardi Gras time. "The whole idea about singing outside is to get attention and we certainly excelled at that," she said. One of her vivid memories from this episode of her life was dividing up the spoils - the day's take - among her colleagues. In addition, Eleanor also was able to secure some solo guitar work at strategic locations in and around the French Quarter such as Ivanhoe's and Poppa Joe's on Bourbon St., wherein her repertoire, in order to accommodate the tastes of the tourists, included more popular selections.



After the Cut-Ups disbanded in the mid-70s, Eleanor joined up with Bill Malone and the Hill Country Ramblers, the name being an inside joke to anyone who resides in South Louisiana where the land is as flat as Eleanor's guitar pick. Bill, the vocalist, was a scholar at Tulane who had written a treatise on the evolution of C&W music for the Library of Congress. Prior to this time, Eleanor, herself, had been somewhat of a chronicler, working her way through Tulane (from which she graduated as an English major) at its Jazz Archive, wherein she recorded oral histories and catalogued vintage recordings,

and also the Jazz Museum there.

Jim Huey, the gifted dobro player of the Hill Country Ramblers and alumnus of the Cut-Ups, could take credit for Eleanor's first Maryland connection. Having a friend "up North," Huey arranged for the band to appear in Bethesda to play a festival and later at the famed Red Fox club in 1976. It was the Bicentennial celebration and Eleanor could remember that the Mall in Washington during the annual Folklife Festival was bustling with acoustic acts, of which many were personal favorites. But even after these presentations had concluded, she found the overall musical climate there to be more favorable to her musical aspirations. In short, after making a few key associations via an open mike session at Gallagher's on Connecticut Ave., she permanently relocated to Maryland.

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



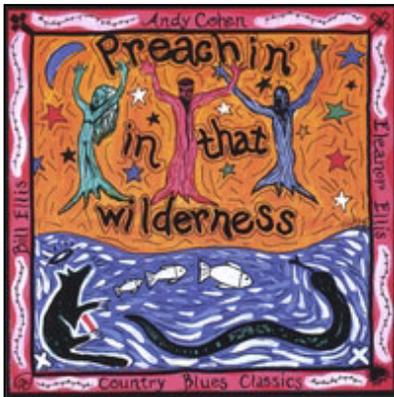
Perhaps it was this involvement in *Blues House Party* that rekindled her desire to play on a regular basis, because her reemergence as a musician coincided with her initial attempts in this venture. Whatever the reason, she did remember a particularly inciting incident in this time frame. There was 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, Ariton, AL, 1993, Photo: Axel Küstner



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, Bontonia, 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.

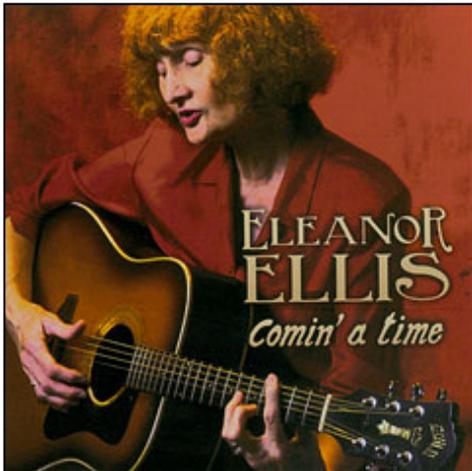
Although Eleanor seemed reluctant to pursue a recording career, she by 1987 realized the necessity of putting together an album which, if nothing else, would serve as a calling card. The resulting eponymous cassette, recorded at American University, ably demonstrated her familiarity with a wide range 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

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