

INTERVIEW

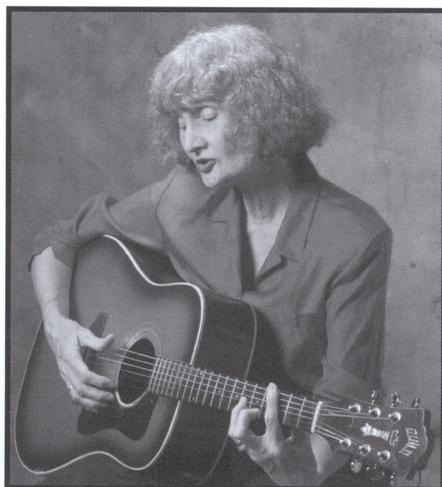
Eleanor Ellis: Preparing To Tour

As Eleanor Ellis is about to commence a UK tour, *Blues in Britain* caught up with her to ask what she's been doing recently and how she sees the future of acoustic blues.

We began though, by asking Eleanor about her earliest experiences of music and how she got into the blues.

I've always been drawn to blues, and to all kinds of roots music. My first real introduction to blues was over WLAC, a radio station in Tennessee which could be heard all over the Southern, Eastern and Midwestern United States. I've since discovered other music fans and musicians who also listened to this station as kids, John Hammond being one. I loved the music and used to lie in bed on school nights with the radio turned on low listening to people like Lightnin' Slim, Lillian Offitt, Carol Fran, Slim Harpo, all kinds of incredible music. This led to my wanting a guitar, and my parents got me a little Martin for my birthday, but I didn't have a clue what to do with it. I used to lie on the bed holding the guitar, listening to the radio, completely puzzled as to how to, translate those 6 strings into the music I was hearing. I had a couple of lessons and learned a couple of scales, but this wasn't what I wanted and that didn't last long. I really began to learn when I was around other people who played, and I've always preferred learning that way.

I was born in New Orleans and grew up in a little town about 80 miles north of there. Growing up, I heard regional music on radio stations from New Orleans, but at the time I didn't realize that what I was hearing was unique to Louisiana. When I was out of school and living in New Orleans I worked at the Jazz Archive, where part of my duties was to go to musical events - jazz funerals, parades and parties - and write them up for the archive. It was a great job, like getting paid to have a good time and hear some great music. Later on I worked at the Jazz Museum when jazz guitarist, historian and raconteur Danny Barker was also in residence. That was also a time when bluesman Babe Stovall was playing all over the French Quarter. Looking back,



I realise that I knew and had contact with some very amazing people. I don't know if this directly influenced the music I play, but I think it influenced my attitude and my desire to document and research and write about things.

When did you first come to Europe?

In 1987 Flora Molton and I spent most of the summer touring Europe. Archie Edwards was with us in Germany and France, and then Flora and I went onto England. We played at the Festival of Avignon and the 100 Club among other places. Flora had always wanted to play in Europe and she enjoyed it thoroughly. I met JoAnn Kelly when she came to hear us, which was special for me because I was and am a great admirer of hers. Simon Prager, who has since become a good friend, was also there that evening.

Tell us about Archie's barbershop.

Archie Edwards was a musician from Virginia who had moved to Washington DC in 1959 and opened his barbershop, the Alpha Tonsorial Parlor (so called because anything beginning with A is listed first in the telephone book). Various musicians would drop by when they were in the area, including John Hurt, who had been Archie's idol for years. By the time I knew Archie he had a ritual of stopping the haircuts on Saturday afternoons

for people to drop in, as Archie put it, to "drink a few beers, play a little music, and tell a few lies." The regular Saturday afternoon jams at the blues barbershop are different now, of course but there is still a lot of music and comradery and many friends made and groups formed from among the musicians who have come there to jam on Saturday afternoons. We have also had some great teaching workshops and concerts there. Archie would have been proud.

How do you feel about the future of acoustic blues

It's never been the biggest thing around, but neither is it going anywhere. It's too real to disappear. It's a very human and hands-on music, and perhaps without knowing quite why, people just like it, and some of them will like it enough to learn to play it.

For those readers new to your music, describe your style.

I play acoustic, and I think of the guitar and the vocals as a kind of duet, two voices, with each providing its own drive and rhythm and playing off the other. I've never been very interested in copying a guitar part exactly, although I think that can be a good learning tool. I choose songs for different reasons, maybe a phrase or a couple of lines, maybe an attitude or rhythm or neat guitar riff. I tend toward the Piedmont style, with its steady alternating bass and syncopated melodies, but also veer off in other directions.

What are your plans for future?

A little more of the same, I think. I've taught at various music camps, and privately as well, and I really enjoy doing that. I like travel and playing at different places, meeting different people, hearing stuff I've never heard. I hope to keep learning and working on the music.

Norman Darwen

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Forthcoming Gigs

- 3 Oct: South London Blues Festival
- 4 Oct: Brooks Blues Bar, Jazz Cafe Posk
- 5 Oct: The Wharf, Macclesfield
- 6 Oct: The Yard, Alderley Edge
- 8 Oct: Dunfermline Folk Club,
- 13 Oct: The Heart of Hawick, Kirkstile

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