



Ronnie Earl, courtesy Story Plain

after the other, 'Kay My Dear', 'Blues For The Homeless' and 'Beautiful Child'. However he bounces right back on the penultimate, if seriously lengthy number (eight seconds short of ten minutes), the blistering 'Blues For Otis Rush' (Nick Adams added on second guitar here). The closing piece is the Limina/Earl composition, 'New Gospel Tune', which is as much a feature for Dave Limina's superb piano playing as it is for Earl's exquisite guitar.

Having followed Earl's career on record for many years, and at a rough head count at least fifteen albums, I have to say that despite a little dip halfway way through which could possibly have been corrected with alternative programming this is as fine a set as any he has recorded. Definitely recommended to all Earl fans and guitar buffs everywhere.

Phil Wight

ELEANOR ELLIS: Comin' A Time

Patuxent CD-138 (65:31)

Take Me Back Baby/ Diving Duck/ Cypress Grove/ 61 Highway/ Wonder Where My Easy Rider's Gone/ Big Road Blues/ In My Girlish Days/ The Panic Is On/ Sun's Gonna Shine/ Texas Easy Street Blues/ Leavin' Trunk/ Me And My Chauffeur/ Kansas City/ Goin' Away Blues/ Special Rider/ Richmond Blues/ Mississippi Blues/ What's The Matter With The Mill

FRANKLIN AND BAYTOP: Searching For Frank

Patuxent CD-156 (46:41)

Champagne Charlie/ Changed The Locks/ Crazy About You/ Nobody's Business/ Some Cold Rainy Day/ You Shall Be Free/ I Got Mine/ Sweet To Mama/ One Way Gal/ Song For Frank/ Beans/ Jail House Blues/ Stop And Listen Blues/ Holy Spirit

WARNER WILLIAMS AND JAY SUMMEROUR:

Down 'n' Dirty

Patuxent CD-163 (39:18)

Black Cat Bone/ My Blue Heaven/ I Got A Woman/ I Can't Help It/ I'm Gonna Move/ Blueberry Hill/ Ain't Gonna Pick No More Cotton/ Sweet Thang/ Greyhound Bus Blues/ Whiskey Headed Woman/ Georgia On My Mind/ Where'm I Gonna Live When I Get Home/ I Got The Blues So Bad

These albums document some of the things going on in the acoustic blues scene in Washington DC, which seems to focus on the barbershop formerly run by Archie Edwards, now being reconstituted as a museum and music workshop venue. The first thing to observe is that this context seems to be fostering a high standard of blues playing, especially in relation to acoustic guitar, and a broad approach to blues repertoire, as well as bringing together a diverse group of musicians, old and young, black and white.

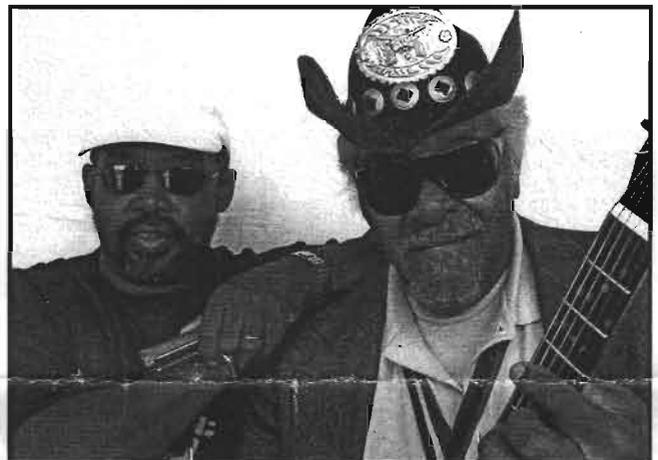
The oldest musician seems to be Warner Williams, now in his late seventies, who has been playing guitar since he was four years old, and although his first interest was in what he calls hillbilly music, he can offer some fine blues picking. You might say that the overall sound is one that speaks of an East Coast origin, but, as so often with bluesmen of Williams' generation, there's a touch of Lightnin' Hopkins in there too. He's also a good singer, with a gritty, sour voice that suits his material very well, and his partnership with younger harp player Jay Summerour is accomplished and very effective. Their blues, while drawing on mostly familiar themes, rarely seem to derive from any particular source. Beyond the blues, their repertoire is the broadest of those on these three albums, taking in songs from Hank Williams and Ernest Tubbs alongside standards like 'Georgia On My Mind' and 'My Blue Heaven'. Most blues singers at any time in the history of the music have no doubt been able to turn their hand to a similar range of material, to please their various audiences, and there's no doubt that this duo do a decent job of making it their own.

Rick Franklin and Michael Baytop (both guitarists and vocalists, with Baytop also contributing harp and percussion on 'bones') make an altogether rougher and more raw kind of sound, but in my book that is no criticism; what they lack in polish gives them a satisfying touch of authenticity. Their repertoire is much more focused on the blues, and while there's no very specific regional aspect to their sound – unlike Williams and Summerour, their blues have clearly identifiable sources, taking in locations from Memphis to Virginia, Georgia to Mississippi – they have no problem integrating it all into a distinctive style. The 'Frank' of the title is Frank Stokes, and it isn't hard to detect a real affection and respect for Stokes' music in their performances, although without mechanical copying (they even manage a reference to Bill Gates in 'I Got Mine').

Eleanor Ellis, originally from Louisiana, is the only one here who is not African American, but she has developed a distinctive sound based on a voice of real quality (reminding me occasionally of Hedy West – no bad thing) and a highly appealing guitar style. There is a particular, melodic touch to her music that I like a lot, demonstrated beautifully on the opening track. Playing solo, she shows a real facility for her instrument, drawing on guitar figures from Skip James (on 'Cypress Grove' and 'Special Rider'), Willie Brown ('Mississippi Blues') and others, but there's also various accompanists, including some lively piano from Joel Bailes, and various harp-men, including Phil Wiggins and, showcasing the network of Patuxent's own musicians, both Summerour and Baytop. Neil Harpe joining in on second guitar adds a nice touch of Kansas Joe to her two Memphis Minnie songs.

The Archie Edwards connection is an interesting one as, while he came out of the Piedmont tradition, he had been devoted to the records of John Hurt from an early age. Maybe somewhere in that combination there's a clue to why none of these musicians have fallen into the familiar trap of getting all intense on us, instead concentrating on approaches that are wholly engaging while consistently musical. Also, as already hinted, one of the things that I've enjoyed about these discs is the broad source of blues repertoire. While so many musicians seem to mine the same old seams over and over again, here there's not a Robert Johnson song in sight, but in the lists of sources we get namechecks for (in addition to those already mentioned) Blind Blake, the Mississippi Sheiks, Henry Thomas, Hezekiah Jenkins, Lottie Kimbrough, Pink Anderson and William Moore, among others. There's real magic in those names and, accordingly, these Washington musicians have conjured up music that does justice to their memories.

Ray Templeton



Above: Jay Summerour and Warner Williams. Below: Mike Baytop and Rick Franklin. Courtesy Patuxent Records.

