

# 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 Cephass and Wiggins (www.cephassandwiggins.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

1,000 individual donors and volunteers keep Centrum going and growing. The man who steers the ship into the Port Townsend harbor year after year is CEO Thatcher Bailey, who is also an AIDS activist. Along with responsibility for guiding, organizing and implementing Centrum programs, he has provided housing in the Puget Sound area for AIDS patients who need help managing the end stages of the illness.

Of particular interest to youth, Centrum has a \$100,000 budget for scholarship students. There are 11 different organizations and foundations that provide scholarships for anyone. Myrna and I have contacted three supporters of blues education and have access to youth: Randy Oxford who works with youth in the South Sound; Jim Geiszler in Bothell, and Dean and Carolyn Jacobsen on Lopez Island. Working together, we will have a roster of youth who might benefit from Centrum but may not have resources to do so. Centrum is looking at diversity to help qualify students, and they are targeting six areas, including ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical mobility, the geographically underserved, low income, and age. Do you know a student that might be interested and may fit one or more of Centrum's criteria? Please contact me at [education@wablu.es.org](mailto:education@wablu.es.org). For more information: [www.centrum.org](http://www.centrum.org).

Several local musicians are perennial Country Blues Workshop students. I spoke with Slim Jimmy D. (Jim Dilanni), a local harp and guitar player, for a participant's point of view. Jim has been going to Centrum for the past four years. He feels that Centrum has given him the opportunity to learn from and play with some of the best musicians in North America.

"And yet," Dilanni says, "Given all these great workshop qualities, the best is hooking up with the myriad of friends I've made over the years. The camaraderie that is present in the dorms, at after-hours jam sessions, sitting in the cafeteria, or watching friends play at the participant concert is the very heart of the Centrum experience."

Friday and Saturday were dedicated to performance. There are several watering holes downtown, and many of the players performed in Port Townsend Friday and Saturday night. Fifteen bucks got you into all of the clubs, so catching some of the shows was easy. Centrum participants had a free shuttle from the fort to the venues and back. On Friday evening, I caught Curley Cooke and Annette Taborn, followed by Son Jack Jr., in a local club.

Friday's shows begin in the afternoon at Fort Worden, held in a former WWII hot air balloon hangar converted into a concert hall. While the acoustics aren't wonderful, the sound crew is; the crew worked hard to neutralize the echo from the metal hangar. While Myrna and I manned the WBS booth outside the hall, we got a sample of all that was offered, and it was all top of the line. These events are ticketed, open to the public, and support Centrum's operating budget.

Special thanks to Peter McCracken, and Eleanor Ellis for their assistance in helping me learn more about the magic of Centrum. 🍷

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## Keeping the Blues Alive Update: 2009 Nominations from the Washington Blues Society

Eric Steiner

The Blues Foundation honors achievement in the blues through the Keeping the Blues Alive Awards held in conjunction with the International Blues Challenge in Memphis. Next year's KBA ceremony will be on Sunday, February 7th the day after the IBC finals.

As a blues society, we are eligible to nominate blues artists in over 25 categories. This year, with the approval of a majority of the Board at our August Board meeting, the Board approved my recommendations for KBA applications in six categories. I know that it's extremely unlikely that we will receive six awards, but I wanted to attract the attention of the KBA committee to get some of our longest-serving blues artists some national recognition.

Our applications for KBA's were due on September 29th, and I am pleased to inform Bluesletter readers that the following nominations will have arrived at the Blues Foundation as this issue lands in readers' mailboxes.

**Art:** Phil Chesnut, for over 25 years of hand-drawn, original art contributions to local, regional, and national blues publications, web sites, societies, touring musicians, and CD covers.

**Public Radio:** John Kessler, for over 25 years' increasingly responsible and creative contributions to public radio, ranging from his work behind the scenes at the Mountain Stage radio program to hosting the weekly "All Blues" program on KPLU-FM at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma.

**Blues Organization:** The Washington Blues Society, for consistently informing the statewide blues community through monthly concerts, a monthly Bluesletter, special events, and an annual picnic. Next year, we'll celebrate our 20th anniversary, and I hope the KBA committee looks to our legacy of keeping the blues alive in the upper left hand corner of the country.

**Printed Matter:** The Bluesletter. Yes, the publication you are holding in your hands, for nearly 20 years of consistent promotion of blues music. For the first time in 2007, the Bluesletter has been self-sustaining through advertising revenues, and we hope to continue this trend with continued support.

**Blues Club:** Highway 99, for offering a diverse range of blues and roots music since 2004, with a special focus on nationally-touring acts. Ed, Eric and Steve have grown the capacity of the club, built a musician-friendly Blue Room, and have consistently supported the local blues community with benefit shows and jam nights.

**Sponsor:** Barbara Hammerman has sponsored blues benefits and concerts for over 20 years, and her early work with Luther Allison is particularly notable. She has opened her home to blues experiences, and most recently, hosted a benefit for Candye Kane at Jazzbones. Hammerman is a stalwart supporter of not only the Washington Blues Society but also the Cascade Blues Association and the Blues Foundation.

KBA nominations are usually due the last week of September. If you have ideas for nominations for next year, contact [president@wablu.es.org](mailto:president@wablu.es.org). Only KBA recipients or affiliate organizations are permitted to submit nominations, and even if our nominees go zero for six in the competition, we will have planted the seeds in the KBA committee membership to consider Washington State blues artists for recognition in future years. 🍷