

# BLUES MATTERS!

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## BETH HART

WITH JOHN MAYALL LOVE

**PLUS: MAYALL TALKS RETIREMENT**  
 INTERVIEWS WITH PATLANSKY, BAILEY, GALES, BARRAS, SCHORR, BANDITS, HERULA, ALLISON, RYDER, LEDET, WININGER, ELLIS AND MORE...



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## BETH HART

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*"I remember as a kid hearing Black Dog for the first time, and thought, If I ever become*

# THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

## ELLY WININGER

by Tim Arnold Images: Jeff Faisano & Jayne Toohey

Leadbelly, Skip James, Cisco Houston, Blind Willie Johnson, Vera Hall, Woody Guthrie, Lightnin' Hopkins, Mississippi John Hurt. And on it goes. Legendary inspirations for a six-year old who learned how to play guitar on a child-sized Harmony acoustic her parents bought her at a church-yard sale when she was a young "Upper West Side red diaper baby" - which is what they called us kids back then whose parents were lefties ... commies ... civil rights activists."

So sayeth Elly Winger, this ageless white Jewish bubble from upstate New York, a NY Blues Hall of Fame inductee (2014) whose latest album, "The Blues Never End" (Earwig, 2021) is a blues-roots, chart-climbing hit.

"I'm the only acoustic guitar player on the charts right now," she tells me in a recent conversation before adding, "My parents had such a great collection of Folkways Records which I listened to when I was so young. I thought Cisco Houston and Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly's stuff was baby music (other Folkways recordings included Peet Seeger, Sonny Terry and topics like "The (Lee Harvey) Oswald Case," "Songs of a Lesbian Anarchist" and Playing Music for Animals)."

"Then I got a round-necked Resonator guitar - the kind with the hubcap in the middle - and

started playing some slide. People told me years later that I sounded just like Blind Willie Johnson. So I said, who's that? And checked him out and realized that's what I was listening to as a tot. "Dark Was the Night" ... I knew every note of it, without knowing it was Blind Willie Johnson. I wasn't trying to sound like him. It just came out that way."

"At that moment I had this kind of visceral experience ... like, oh my God, this stuff is in my blood. "I was immersed in it ... although I really didn't get it back then. It took me a while to figure out what 'it' was."

And she did. And took it down one of those roads less traveled. When Elly was growing up Jews had little access to the WASP-controlled mass communications industry - but "the music business was wide open for Jews as it was for Blacks. Jews played a key role in developing and popularizing African-American music, including rhythm and blues," particularly the independent record business. By the mid-50's they owned or managed some 40% of the independent companies recording and distributing rock-and-roll and 'race' music, as it was called back then. Chess, National Records, King, Savoy, Apollo, Atlantic, Specialty, Aladdin,



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### INTERVIEW | ELLY WININGER

Fortune Records, Scepter et al.

Jerry Wexler, who coined the phrase 'rhythm and blues,' and Jerry Leiber, who wrote many classic soul and R&B songs with partner Mike Stoller, identified with blacks and black culture. Many of the songs that informed the early harmonizing of black groups who sang doo-wop emanated from Jewish artists and composers based in the Brill Building, on Broadway in mid-town Manhattan, including Leiber and Stoller, Carole King, Cynthia Weil and Ellie Greenwich.

I asked Elly Winger about this Jewish-Black sympatico in the birth of the rhythm that is the blues. "Jews and Black people have a lot in common," she tells me. "Persecution, other cultures trying to obliterate them. We were slaves, too - to the Pharaoh. The classic gospel song, 'Wade in the Water,' is about Jews escaping slavery in Egypt:"

*'See that band all dressed in white  
It look like a band of the Israelites ...  
See that band all dressed in red ...  
Look like a band that Moses led  
God is gonna trouble these waters.'*

"That's me," Elly says. "That's my tribe. How could we not relate to the black experience?"

"Anyway, back then Jewish children had to take music lessons. So I did. Piano. Violin - which I hated. I finally took some guitar lessons. I could read music - but I didn't need to. I felt it. I also went to the Manhattan School of Music for arranging." A feature which is evident in much of her work.

Plug in "The Blues Never End" and give it a listen. Elly Winger will take you to a place the old scratchy vinyl discs once did, inspired by her legendary influences - and brings it up way past today to a head and heart space you know is in there but just can't find.

Covers include Sister Rosetta Tharpe's version

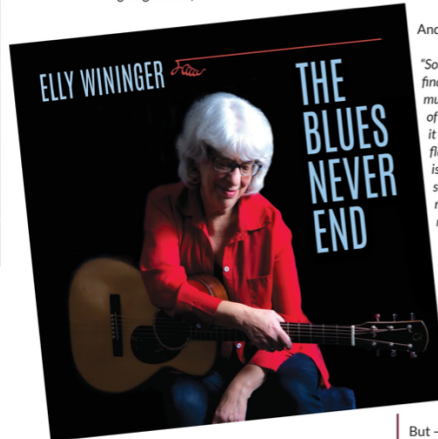


of the traditional "Let That Liar Alone." Skip James' hometown Mississippi "Special Rider Blues;" Blind Lemon Jefferson and Huddie Ledbetter's "Black Snake Moan" ("A Dixieland band brought this to life for me" - from Elly's artists notes); Texas Alexander and Lonnie Johnson's "Range in my Kitchen" ("sure seems like a woman should be signing this one"); Ledbetter's "Old Riley;" Blind Willie Johnson on "God Moves on the Water" (Blind Willie's got to be one of the spookiest and most unique artists ever!); Tony Joe White's "As the Crow Flies" ("I stripped this one down to the rural roots I heard"); and Greeshie Wiley's "Skinny Legs Blues" ("I left out the verse about her slitting a guy's throat")

Ain't a straight-ahead Chicago blues 1-4-5 arrangement on this album. It's all stuff that just comes out of her in honest, heart-felt expressions of ... life. Her pipes are warm, rich and genuine. Insistent. And comforting. Her National Steel guitar pickin underscores much

of it with an honest, unpretentious soul rare in today's commercial 'blues' releases.

The other cuts are pure Elly originals: the title track "The Blues Never End"; "(I Wanna Be Like) Rosie" ("My paean to Zydeco accordion player and songwriter Rosie Ledet"); and "Right Kind of Trouble" ("I envision Jessica Rabbit signing this ...").



And the reviews describe her work this way:

*"Elly Winger is two wonderful things: a throw-back to the golden age of folk and blues artists of the 1960's and 70's, and a contemporary singer/songwriter whose music is just as vital and engaging now as it was a half-century ago. She has an effortless, fluid guitar style with vocals to match."*

- Blues Roadhouse

*"All the original numbers on this album glow like a*

*white dress in a nightclub."*

- Cascade Blues Association

*"The most striking thing about Elly Winger is how warm and appealing a singer she is ... In addition to her fervent singing, her crisp guitar playing has a flowing quality evocative of the Piedmont blues and Mississippi John Hurt ... superb slide guitar ..."*

- Jazz & Blues Report

And this one ...

*"Sometimes you open a bottle of wine, take a sip, find it enjoyable, and finish the glass without too much thought. Other times, you open a bottle of wine, are taken in by the aroma, decide to let it breathe, take a taste and savor the complex flavors. The Blues Never Ends by Elly Winger is like that. (Her) acoustic guitar playing ... subtle rather than gritty, complex rather than relying on power and repetition, and elegant rather than crude."*

- The Holler, Colorado Blues Society

Then there's "Alabama Blues," one of the four originals on her latest album, and it says everything you need to know about Elly Winger. Listen to the music. A lulling riff that captures the essence of everything good about the "old blues." Engaging vocals. Flirtatious guitar pickin and strummin.

But - hear her words. She takes on an explosive, politicized issue that is at the very heart of women's rights. Choice. The right to choose an abortion. Quoting Anni Piper from the Cascade Blues Association, "Her lyrics are a scathing indictment of the restrictions that are being placed on access to abortion, and she also references incest as the reason for needing the procedure. This song could not be more relevant right now. Winger's boldness and courage in tackling these issues in her art, in the context of an America that's as divided as a quotient, has to be commended."

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## INTERVIEW | ELLY WININGER

"I was really angry when I wrote this song," from Elly. "Still am."

*I thought we had this figured out.  
I thought there was a law  
Protecting girls who'd been raped  
By a stranger or their pa.  
But now it seems we've travelled back-  
I heard it on the news.  
Stuck here with the Alabama Blues.  
Those stinkin backward Alabama Blues*

"The blues is a visceral experience. This stuff is in my blood," Elly tells me.

And she bleeds in many colors ... she was the very first artist CBGB's (Country, Blue Grass and Blues) booked on opening night in 1973 down in Greenwich Village, NYC, and was offered a recording contract at the sweet young age of 16. So she starts cutting school and hanging out, listening to the likes of Muddy, Lightnin Hopkins and Dave Van Ronk. Since then she's done a Clio award-winning public service campaign against drunk driving, hosts the podcast show, "Catskill Cabaradio," and has created "Our Song," a program used by many organizations to assist people of all ages and abilities in writing their own songs.

Blues roots.

"The old blues artists had a unique sound and style. We've lost a bit of that today. Lot of today's stuff is straight ahead Chicago blues. Very repetitive. Not original. Nobody sounds like Skip James these days. Can't even come close."

Elly does. She's the real deal.  
Her work says it all.

"You know how you tell a poser? They're playing an electric guitar and they make this face before they hit the note ... so they're headed up to some high, wailing choke note, and screw up their face and then hit the note. You know they're full of shit ...

"And if you publish any of this, Tim ... I'll get trashed," and I'm thinking since when does truth get trashed? (And we're publishing it with her permission).



All of this is at the foundation of her most recent effort, an expressive, politically-motivated single release, "January 6," about, yeah, January 6...

*Some of us saw it coming  
Some of us looked the other way  
Some of us thought this could never happen  
Not here in the USA.  
No matter what you believe in  
No matter where you stand  
You're gonna remember  
Just where you were  
And what you were doing  
When the shit hit the fan.*

*Once a lie gets rolling  
Like a snowball down a hill  
Picking up dirt, picking up speed  
Keeps on rolling until  
Some people start to believe it  
Just 'cause they wish it were true  
With alternate facts  
They make their attacks and their plans  
And the shit hits the fan.  
Just takes one schemer who knows how  
To spread hate and lies though a crowd.*

This bubble kicks some serious ass. The truth. So, you wanna jump, jive and wail? Pour yourself some Rebel Yell, neat, and crank up one of Joe Bonamassa's million sellers. Or, wanna find what's really inside your ownself? Down deep? Uncork that bottle of wine and take a walk down that road less traveled with Elly Winger's "The Blues Never End." You may never want to come back.