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The Blues Never End
Elly Winger
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Reviewed by Jack Grace

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 End* by Elly Winger is like that. I had some errands to run one day that spread across two towns so I popped Winger's CD in the car audio player to give it a listen. I ended up listening to it three times that day. Each time I discovered more textures and authenticity in her music. One thing I discovered for sure is that she is a masterful acoustic blues guitar player and terrific songwriter.

The Blues Never End contains four original songs by Winger plus a palette of classic blues songs by early blues artists such as Skip James, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lead Belly, and Blind Willie Johnson. To include a contemporary artist, she covers Tony Joe White's "As the Crow Flies."

Winger took guitar lessons from a then struggling musicology student from Columbia University. You might have heard of him - David Bromberg. As Winger describes that time, "I dove into the blues and ragtime fingerpicking with all the enthusiasm of a high school student avoiding homework, which I was." Those lessons were well learned. Winger, like a lot of artists at that time, began by playing in coffee houses. In 1973, she found herself singing back up with Maria Muldaur at the Philadelphia Folk Festival. That is an interesting connection because some of the songs on this CD have a Muldaur-like vibe. Winger does not have the bawdy voice of Muldaur but you can hear the phrasing and inflection on at least a couple of songs. Those two would sing very well together.

The songs on this CD tell stories. They are not simply words that rhyme to a catchy melody. I am going to comment on just a few - only because this is a collection of songs that is best discovered by yourself. Put the headphones on and go to a quiet place where you can let the music absorb you.

"Skinny Legs Blues" was written by Geeshie Wiley. It is one of only six songs she recorded for Paramount Records in 1930. Paul Duffy adds some delightful stride piano as background for Winger's guitar. Listen and it will bring a smile. The song that follows is "Right Kind of Trouble." It's an original. The writing is stellar. First verse is: "Too much time by myself, Too much honey sitting on the shelf, So I'm looking for the right kind of trouble." We have all been there. And, Winger puts us right back in that place. All the songs on this CD are wonderful but one of my favorites is "Alabama Blues." In 2019, the Alabama legislature passed a bill making it a felony to perform an abortion. There was no exception for rape or incest. The governor signed the bill into law. Naturally, the law was challenged in court and a District Judge ruled it unconstitutional. The law was never implemented but it remains a threat. The passage of that law clearly upended Winger's sense of justice and progress in women's rights. She wrote "Alabama Blues" from the viewpoint of a young woman who was raped and impregnated by her uncle. It is one powerful song!

“The Blues Never End” is the title song of the CD. I cannot say anything other than it is beautiful. It is an experience to listen to it. The last song I am going to comment on is “Black Snake Moan” - the old Blind Lemon Jefferson song recorded in 1926. Winger stays true to the guitar motif of the song but adds a Dixieland Jazz backing that is a joy.

I am really impressed by Winger’s acoustic guitar playing. It is subtle rather than gritty, complex rather than relying on power and repetition, and elegant rather than crude. Her guitar sounds more like a Gibson J-45 than a punchy archtop. She shared with me that it was made by Ivon Schmukler of Artisan Fretted Instruments. It has a sweet silky sound. Add that guitar to Winger’s mastery of the instrument and we have a really strong combination. She also plays a resonator guitar and is quite a slide player too.

These are stories and music worthy of taking the time to listen to them properly. Doing so is rewarding. Enjoy.