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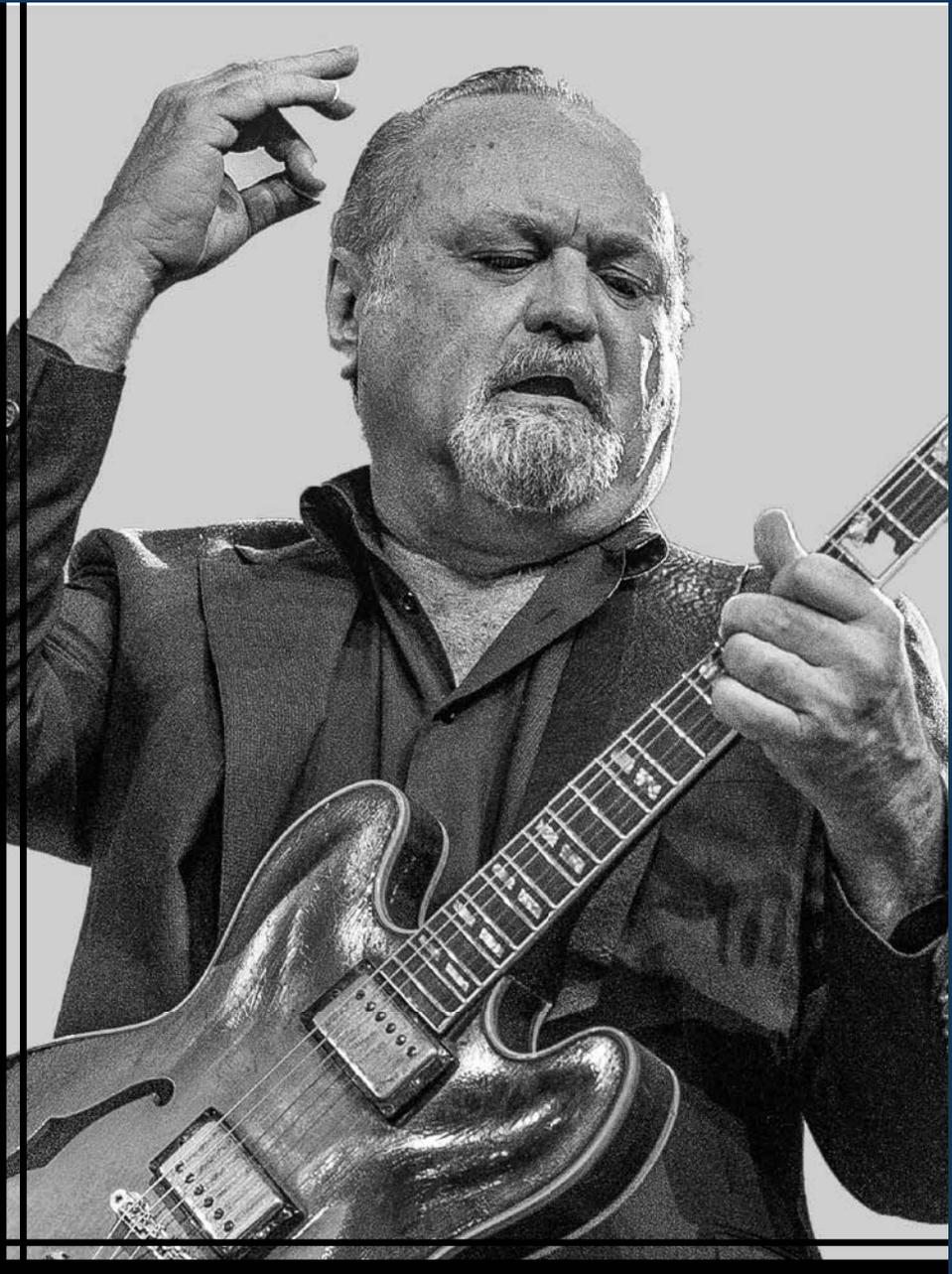
Tinsley Ellis is a road dawg, a guitar gypsy wandering the world spreading the gospel of soulful, rockin' blues. Born in Atlanta, Ellis grew up in South Florida but came back to go to college in Atlanta and never left. Starting out in 1977 with the Alley Cats, then teaming up with harpist Chicago Bob Nelson in 1981 as The Heartfixers, Ellis soul-soaked blues and stinging Strat work has filled 19 albums with blistering blues-rock.

Ellis made a living from an East Coast loop that carried him from Atlanta through North Carolina, often playing at the Rhinoceros club in Greensboro. He wasn't there the night in '85 when Bruce Springsteen stopped after a coliseum gig on his Born in the USA tour and played "Hang On Sloopy" and "Stand by Me" with the Del Fuegos. But he did strike up a friendship and working relationship with a couple of Greensboro-based musicians, former Muddy Waters sideman Bob Margolin and saxophonist Jimmy Carpenter.

"THE blues guy there is Bob Margolin," says Ellis, who has known Margolin since the late '70s. "We did that Blues at the Crossroads tour (in 2013), and he was my mentor, sharing stuff he had learned from Muddy and stuff he had learned with Son House. We did 10 shows, me and him with James Cotton and the Fabulous Thunderbirds and Jody Williams all over America. Rode in a bus, kicked back on the tour bus, had bunks and everything and Bob and I said, 'We'd better savor this, cause it's back in the vans we go in a coupla weeks.'"

Ellis has high praise for Carpenter, (Jimmy Thackery and the Drivers, Walter "Wolfman" Washington, Eric Lindell, and Mike Zito and the Wheel) also touring with Ellis in '98. "One of the greatest sax players on the circuit. I really thought when Bobby Keys died, he had a shot, or even the big man with Springsteen, 'cause he plays that kind of sax, not a lot of scales or anything, just a lot of honkin' tenor."

But one of the most impressive encounters Ellis ever had was with Stevie Ray Vaughan when they both were just starting out. "He came through in '79 the first time and played a show at the Capri Theater in Buckhead with Bill Sheffield's band, the XL's, that was Double Trouble, sat in with us in '81 when I was in the Heartfixers," Ellis says. "We'd never seen anything like Stevie Ray Vaughan before.



We were still in a period of Southern Rock, Dickie Betts and people like that with their Les Pauls and long hair and buckskins, and here comes Stevie Ray, he's all pimped out and playing a Stratocaster, that was pretty unheard of, other guys playing Les Pauls at the time, and he just blew our minds."

Vaughan did several shows and sat in, but the last time he came back and played at the Downtown Cafe, they only made \$35 dollars for the night. "Slept on our floor, had no money," Ellis recalls. "They were spozed to play there two nights, and they just said, 'The hell with this,' and went back to Austin."

But he did leave Ellis with a souvenir he still treasures and uses. "He got up on stage and played my Strat

through my Super Reverb. I still to this day play that same guitar, that same amp, among other guitars, other amps, but I tour with that equipment, and I never changed the settings after he sat in. I could tell you the settings..." he says, with a dramatic pause for effect, "but then I'd have to kill you. People who come out and see me play, they get close enough, they can read the settings on my super reverb."

Ellis wasn't the only guitarist influenced by Vaughan's passage through Atlanta. "The Vaughan brothers came through Atlanta in the late '70s, and all the Les Paul players went out and bought Stratocasters. Pretty interesting phenomenon. And the price went through the roof on 'em too. In the late '70s, that

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by Grant Britt

## RED CLAY SOUL MAN

'59 Strat I play was \$700 bucks. That was all the money I had."

Ellis' assets have increased somewhat since then, but his Strat and a '60s ES-345 are still his go-to instruments on the road and in the studio. "That's the kind of guitar that Freddie King and B.B. King made a lot of their recordings on," he says of his vintage Gibson. "Between those two guitars, I can get pretty much all the sounds I want for a blues or a blues-rock show."

They're not just pretty toys to hang on the wall or look at under glass. "I'm always dragging these things all over the country," Ellis says. "I record and tour with 'em. I don't leave 'em at home. They go with me and they stay with me. If I didn't have those two guitars, seriously, I would just hang it up. They're irreplaceable. Like a stock car would be. So many modifications, and then you take the modification away, you restore it to stock, then you modify it again, Right now it's pretty much restored to stock, but that's subject to change."

Over the years, Ellis' sound has remained pretty much the same, fiery blues backed with soulful vocals. But during his Alligator Records tenure, he wanted a change-up and label head Bruce Iglauer wasn't agreeable. "There's a James Taylor in me just dying to get out," Ellis chuckles. "They wanted me to be Hound Dog Taylor, not James." The split from Alligator resulted from an idea Ellis had in 2012 to do an instrumental album, 2013's *Get It*. Alligator was skeptical, so Ellis started his own label. He jokes that his own label was skeptical too, but he figured if the album failed he could blame it on the fact it was instrumental. But it didn't fail, leading to three more releases, including his latest, *Red Clay Soul*.

The title is such a perfect description of what Ellis does you wonder why he hasn't labeled it as such before. "We don't name albums and then make 'em, we make 'em and then name 'em," Ellis says. "We're listening to some of the songs, and our co-producer, keyboardist Kevin McKendree, (Delbert McClinton, Brian Setzer) said, 'Man, this stuff has a seriously Southern vibe.' So I thought we don't want to call it seriously Southern, but we want it to have that kind of feel. So red clay, that's the geographic description of it, and hopefully soul is the musical description."

McKendree has been on every Ellis studio album since '97's *Fire It Up*. "There's never been another musician I've met whose playing suits me better," Ellis says. The pianist stirs up a bit of '70s nostalgia on the opening cut, "All I Think

About," sounding like Leon Russell on his Mad Dogs and Englishmen period. "Finally I'm talking to a writer who recognizes that," he laughs. "That's exactly where it's from, the era when Leon Russell was producing Freddie King, *Texas Cannonball* (Shelter, 1972.) Leon Russell's one of my favorite song writers, and it was about time I got busted on that one."

He says McKendree's piano is "not quite rockabilly, kind of an amped-up Ray Charles sound, and Kevin nails it, he always knows with my recordings when I want him to do that, which is pretty much all the time."

The tune Ellis wrote with Oliver Wood some ten years ago, "Giving It Up," sounds like a tribute to Delbert McClinton. "I definitely did a little Delbert-style harmonica playing on it, which is a nice harmonica style, sort of a Jimmy Reed," Ellis says.

"I've never really been an innovator, but I'm not a copycat either," Ellis says. "Pop culture is driven by two things, driven by youth, driven by image, so I'm pretty much screwed then. I really always wanted to say that in an interview." Ellis says that if you don't make it in your 20s in the pop music world, then you better bring something to the table like songwriting because rock and roll is for young, long-haired skinny people. "When you start looking regular, then you start looking like the audience's parents, so musicianship becomes more important."

He also puts a premium on apprenticeship. "Seems like lately, people have been bursting on the scene looking like teenage underwear models in the blues world and that's a disturbing trend, because I'm rarely entertained by virgins. I want somebody that's gone through some shit, gotten locked up, divorced, some real life experiences. And so I'm more apt to be entertained by the Bonnie Raitts of the world, people who have been knocked around by the industry."

And once again, Stevie Ray's influence looms large. "Lord knows we could use another Stevie Ray Vaughan. When the planets converge like they did with him, it's a remarkable thing," Ellis says. "He held the door open for us in '83, and the rest of us just walked in behind him. So we need another dude like that or woman like that. We gotta have these young people doing it, but by the same token, its gotta be an old sound and have that old sound early. We're always looking, so many blues musicians, but so few bluesmen."