



JO-ANN KELLY

British Queen Of 6- And 12-String Country Blues

By Stefan Grossman

CALLED BY SOME critics the British Queen of Country Blues, Jo-Ann Kelly was first exposed to the Mississippi music, of Ford “Snooks” Eaglin, Robert Johnson, and Memphis Minnie McCoy in 1963, when the Swing Shop, a local blues and jazz specialty record store in Bristol, England, began featuring their music. She found a particular affinity for the powerful voice and formidable guitar style of Memphis Minnie; 15 years and thousands of performances later, Jo-Ann still performs Minnie’s songs in concert. In 1969 *Jo-Ann Kelly* [Epic, 63841] was released, and since then Jo-Ann has recorded two more solo albums, and her vocal and 12-string guitar work has appeared on over a dozen others, with such diverse acts as John Fahey, the John Dummer Blues Band, Tramp, guitarist Tony McPhee, and Chilli Willi & The Red Hot Peppers.

Jo-Ann first became interested in music when the Everly Brothers, Elvis Presley, and the Skiffle music of England’s Lonnie Donegan were aired on British radio. When she was 14 she began playing guitar. “In the very beginning,” she says, “my brother Dave was learning Skiffle from a guy down the road. Dave showed me three or four chords, and once I got the basic, workable materials that I needed to play, I pretty much taught myself by ear. By the time I was 15 we were playing Everly Brothers stuff in talent competitions.” Jo-Ann accompanied her brother to the Swing Shop when she was 19, and there discovered her first taste of American country blues. “They were playing Skip James, and I didn’t like it at first,” Jo-Ann remembers. “But as I became more exposed to this kind of music, Snooks Eaglin and Robert Johnson became my favorites.” A year later Jo-Ann met Tony

McPhee, lead guitarist for the Groundhogs, while she was in the Swing Shop. “Money was tight in those days,” Jo-Ann says, “and Dave and I would each buy an album and take it home and listen to it. McPhee bought a Memphis Minnie album from the shop and came over, saying ‘Listen to this—it’s terrific. This music will really suit you.’ I clicked with Memphis Minnie’s music immediately, and felt quite an affinity for it. I think you can trace a line between Snooks Eaglin, Robert Johnson, Memphis Minnie, and Charley Patton—they are all strongly rhythmic. I didn’t much like Skip James and Blind Lemon Jefferson when I first heard them—they were a little bit too esoteric.”

1964 found Great Britain in the midst of a surge of interest for American blues; in May the Rolling Stones released their first album, featuring songs written by Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed, and in October the Animals released *House Of The Rising Sun*. The Yardbirds, whose first album would appear in June 1965, had just replaced the Rolling Stones as the house band at the Crawdaddy Club in Richmond, and their repertoire included faithful renditions of blues classics by Sonny Boy Williamson and Muddy Waters. “In Bristol there was a country blues revival going on at this time,” Jo-Ann says, “and there were a lot of young musicians playing electric blues too—Chicago stuff. This was the year the blues boom happened in England, and you could pick Newcastle, Bristol, and London as the three cities with the strongest interest. Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Jimmy Reed came over, and the Groundhogs used to back them up at the Whiskey-A-Go-Go in Newcastle, and I’d go and listen to them.”

Jo-Ann began performing acoustic sets in pubs, Colleges, and folk Clubs around

Bristol and London when she was 21. “I’ve always had a deepish voice,” she says, “and I think that when I started I was definitely trying to copy Memphis Minnie. I’d sit at home trying to sing ‘Nothing In Rambling’ exactly as she sang it. But I think you lose the definitive version you’ve copied as you play it more and more. It changes because you’re yourself, not the person you’ve copied. On guitar, I was trying to do bottleneck things in Fred McDowell and Robert Johnson styles. McPhee could sit down and learn a Charley Patton number absolutely note-perfect; mine was always much more an interpretation. Although I tried to copy Memphis Minnie’s voice because I liked the sound of it, my guitar was always much more of an approximation—a much rougher thing.”

One night Giorgio Gomelsky, manager of the Yardbirds, listened to Jo-Ann and invited her to rehearse with the group. “I went down to the rehearsal,” Jo-Ann remembers, “and Eric Clapton was there. I had a background of Everly Brothers, and the song we did was ‘Baby, What You Want Me To Do,’ which is a Jimmy Reed tune. At the rehearsal I did an Everly Brothers swing while Clapton’s guitar work just knocked me out.”

Jo-Ann recorded several sessions for Liberty Records that were released on blues sampler albums during the middle Sixties, as well as *Same Thing On Their Minds* [Liberty/UA, SLS 50209], in collaboration with Tony McPhee. She attended several National Blues Conventions in London, including one that featured Canned Heat. Jo-Ann recalls: “I had a little jam with Al Wilson—their guitarist, who was then playing harp—and Bob Hite, Heat’s singer, came up and said, ‘We really enjoyed that stuff—would you like

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to join the band? I approached the whole thing with a totally non-business attitude, and turned them down. I now think it would have been great to do a year with Canned Heat, because then I would have had the experience and made my name. I was just so much into acoustic blues—a bit of a purist, I'm afraid."

On the strength of her 1969 Epic album, Jo-Ann was invited to attend the Memphis Blues Festival later that year. At the festival she met Johnny Winter. Several months later CBS flew Jo-Ann back to the U.S. to perform at their record convention in Los Angeles. "The people at CBS said, 'All we want you to do is come over, and then we'll fly you to Johnny Winter's house in New York and you two can see what you can do together,'" Jo-Ann recalls. "Johnny and I sat down and played some acoustic blues and that was great, but again I was very much out of a band scene. I was very keen to do a tour, though. The idea was that I would start the show with an acoustic set by myself, and then Johnny would play a couple of acoustic numbers with me at the end of my set. Then his band would come on and at some point in their set I would go on and do some numbers with the band. But my record background was strictly country blues, and I wasn't very well acquainted

with what you could do with a band. Anyway, when it came to the crunch, CBS offered me \$80 a week for the tour. I said, 'Man, that won't even take care of my plane fare, let alone my hotel.' I really didn't know what was going on—I had no idea that a manager pays for the tour, or about management of anything like a tour—I had steered clear of all that. So the tour didn't come off, largely because they weren't prepared to sink any money into it, and they expected the management to. They were lazy about the whole thing, really, and I was too ignorant to push for anything".

Jo-Ann recorded *Jo-Ann Kelly With John Fahey, Alan Seidler, Woody Mann And John Miller* [Blue Goose (245 Waverly Pl., New York, NY 10014), BG 2009] in 1972. "I had met Nick Perls [director of Blue Goose] several years before, when I was helping to run a Club in England," Jo-Ann says. "John Lee Hooker and Big Joe Williams used to come down there to play, and we had some good sessions with them. A friend of mine brought Nick down to see me singing, and Nick asked me to sign a record contract. In those days I was still very much non-business—there was a common attitude at the time that said big business is on one side of the fence, performers are on the other, and never the twain shall meet. Now that kind of division is gone, thank goodness. I said no to Nick, and yet he is probably one of the

straightest people when it comes to dealing on the level. He talked me into recording live in clubs; he made a special trip to England with a Revox recorder and made the tapes—but I think the CBS album that resulted from them isn't too good." Jo-Ann recorded in a studio in the U.S. for the Blue Goose album, and the sessions were not without difficulties. "I was just singing then," she says, "and I really didn't like Nick's attitude very much on those songs—saying things like, 'Okay, Kelly, get in the studio and sing, you made a mistake there, you were out of tune,' and things like that—it really wasn't a very happy session at all. I enjoyed playing guitar with Woody Mann, because Woody's a really easy person to get along with; I particularly like his music. I would like to do something in the future with Woody. There wasn't a great deal of time in which to do the album, and I think we were all having personal problems at the time. I enjoyed working with John Fahey—his blues are kind of rhythmic and basic, and his picking stuff is not very complicated. All in all, though, it was a very difficult session."

Later in 1972 Jo-Ann founded Spare Rib, a rock band which included Bruce Rowlands, who had previously been Joe Cocker's drummer, and Roger Brown—who had formed the original Steeler's Wheel with Gerry Rafferty—on vocal har-

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monies. The band lasted a year. "It really would have been good had it continued," Jo-Ann says, "and had I been more together at the time."

Jo-Ann returned to the U.S. in 1973 and traveled as a solo act with Taj Mahal and Larry Coryell. Recently she has been featured on Tramp's *Put A Record On* [Musicman, SRLP 112], and has broadcast on London's Capital Radio. She performs concerts with accompanist Pete Emery (former lead guitarist of the John Dummer Blues Band), with whom she recorded *Do It* [Red Ragg (Carmel-Ragg Agency, 268 Kingston Rd., Teddington, Middlesex, England), RRR 006] in 1976. Included on this album are four songs by Memphis Minnie and an unaccompanied field holler.

Jo-Ann's 6-string and 12-string acoustic guitars were made by Tony Zemaitis [108 Walderslade Rd., Chatham, Kent, England; see GP, Apr. '75], and she favors bronze light-gauge strings and sometimes uses a flatpick. "I've tried to stop using fingerpicks in the last year or so," Jo-Ann says, "because then you're closer to the guitar. I think my style generally used to be pretty much a thrashing thing—you know, use picks on anything and thrash like hell all the way through it. People loved it; they'd say, 'Wow, she's really

strong for a guitar player.' I still use fingerpicks on certain numbers—I guess I'm just being more discriminating about when I use picks. I use three fingers for some things, though I still mainly use two. Recently I started chicken picking—the sort of thing that Jerry Reed does, which is really country style."

Jo-Ann has considered forming another band, but, she says, "it's just so difficult these days to get the right people—people you can get along with personally and musically. And you've got to get the money, roadies, a van, and the PA, none of which we've got. Then I kind of rethought this and decided that since people like what I do on guitar—acoustic stuff—that's what I'll do. So I've learned a lot of the old blues stuff and some new numbers, and I've rearranged them a bit. The possibility of a band is still there, however. It would be a natural progression for us." ■