

PIEDMONT BLŪZ

Ambassadors of Country Blues

No Label – No #

Apropos women in the blues, as celebrated in this issue of *Living Blues*, there is Valerie Turner, a swift fingerpicking Piedmont blues guitarist in Queens, New York. She studied under the late Piedmont master John Cephas and with Woody Mann, among others. Along with Eleanor Ellis, Erin Harpe, Mary Flower, and Lauren Sheehan she carries on the rich East Coast acoustic folk blues tradition. Uniquely, she partners with her husband, Benedict Turner, who accompanies her singing and instrumentation



with gentle washboard percussion. Together, they are Piedmont Blūz, a duo committed to preserving country blues. Nobody else today sounds or plays like them. They are free, idiosyncratic, and creatively innovative, yet deeply traditional. This album is gentle, and still a wild ride through the old-time country blues. It's going to raise some eyebrows.

Ambassadors of Country Blues is their first professionally produced album, recorded at Patuxent Music in Rockville, Maryland, a studio that specializes in recording acoustic roots and blues music. The results are joyous. The duo is captured in their peak instrumental glory, offering lovely renditions of country blues standards. Valerie Turner is an exquisite fingerpicker, one of the finest on the acoustic blues scene today. Musically, she is positioned firmly in the Elizabeth Cotten / Etta Baker / John Hurt corner of the acoustic blues. She is also a fan of Memphis Minnie, something she holds in common with virtually any woman acoustic blues artist today. It's no great surprise that the duo opens the new album with sweet renditions of Libba Cotten's *Freight Train*, *When the Levee Breaks* by Memphis Minnie, and *Avalon Blues* by Mississippi John

Hurt. All are signature sounds of the duo, flawlessly played and vivid in expression. Valerie Turner picks with virtuosic perfection, each note clear and airy, with room to breathe. She means every note she plays and makes sure you feel it, accompanied by her rich voice. Then comes the fourth cut, heavy as a sledgehammer, and now feelings of being impressed morph into sheer amazement. Ry Cooder once said that Blind Willie Johnson's song *Dark Was the Night* was the most soulful and transcendental piece in all American music ever recorded, and he was right. That's a powerful compliment from someone who knows. *Last Kind Words* by Geeshie Wiley, as covered here by the Piedmont Blūz, actually deserves the same accolades. Their version of this deep, sorrowful song is as heavy as it gets, emotively compelling and nothing short of stunning. The original is momentous and true. It takes a daring soul to tackle a song that articulates a lifetime of suffering, the blues as the human condition. Valerie Turner grabs you right down to the soul. Simply breathtaking and precious, at the same time hauntingly, wrenchingly sad. The blues at its finest. Stunning!

Valerie Turner then kicks Blind Willie McTell's famed *Statesboro Blues* into high gear. They cover their standards like *C.C. Rider*, *Joliet Bound* by Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, and *Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor*, with swift quintessence. They throw in a wonderful version of Lightnin' Hopkins' gospel *Needed Time* with remarkably lovely sliding.

Someone must have said, "Close it in style!" They get outright dramatic on Gary Davis' *Whistlin' Blues*, invoking Hawaiian slide glissandos and chimes from the National guitar, coupled with Valerie's refined fingerpicking. Nothing short of a masterpiece. To find just one word: beautiful!

—Frank Matheis