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Ellen McIlwaine
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The Ellen McIlwaine Band brought its own special brand of fire and brimstone rock and roll to Eugene and set the town aflame with its dynamic and original sounds.

Ellen McIlwaine is a shadowy figure on the outskirts of the rock world. Due to her increasingly esoteric style, which has evolved from blues to a hard-punching rock over the last 17 years, she is often misunderstood or overlooked by many who would enjoy her individuality. Her music is the essence of rock and roll — overtly erotic in texture and content; her voice like a wildcat in heat, matched in its electricity only by the raw power of her guitar.

From the moment she appeared on stage for a sound check, everyone knew the evening would be different. It was no ordinary sound check. The first high notes she hit on her slide guitar caught everyone



Ellen McIlwaine

Between rock and a hard place

in the house rubbernecking. From this point on she had them right where she wanted them.

McIlwaine's slide guitar playing is more akin to Jimi Hendrix than to the blues slide most of us are used to. It was accentuated by the crafted rhythm section of Mitch Elrod on bass and Roger Martin on drums. Together with McIlwaine they are like a three-sided coin, each allowed equal and ample room for improvisation.

McIlwaine faces two challenges as an artist. The first is classic: having one's art accepted without compromising it. She has never played mainstream music. In the beginning she chose to navigate the headwaters of the blues tradition while others like Bonnie Raitt marketed a watered-down product, more popular but with less vitality.

Now she has forged her own style of esoteric rock and roll that sounds like a combination of African tribal chanting, recent King Crimson and Janis Joplin in her prime. As Elrod said, "the (recording) industry wants everyone to suck up the same thing." Needless to say, the industry will never be beating down McIlwaine's door.

The second challenge makes the first look easy. McIlwaine wants to be recognized as a guitarist while many of her fans

want her to be primarily a vocalist. "They spotlight me when I sing, not when I play," she says.

This attitude, McIlwaine says, often results in requests to turn down the guitar volume. But she's used to this sort of thing and doesn't let the catcalls bring her down, as was obvious when she launched into "Dig for the Reason," a syncopated repeating vocal tune guaranteed to make the audience move. The band pumped for all it was worth and the dance floor filled to capacity to hear the Gospel According to Ellen.

A smile crept over her face as she pulled out some of the real show-stoppers. "Take Me to the River," an Al Green song (and, more recently, by Talking Heads) was reworked into a new funk mold. The band laid down a Herbie Hancock-ish riff which McIlwaine punctuated with crisp thrusts from her wah-wah.

This led into Albert King's classic "Born Under a Bad Sign," which the band treated with more feeling than "The King" himself mustered up when he was in town in September. She almost spoke some of the lines on this one, with a gruff realism that reminded me of the tone a lover uses when she's had it up to here with you.

By the end of the set McIlwaine was beaming. The first

thing she said as she grabbed a Henry's was, "What do you think of these guys, aren't they great? (Other musicians) either lay back too much or beat the hell out of you. These guys let us all be equals."

"I'm doing what I always wanted to do," she said, "but I was always afraid to try it because people refuse to let females be anything but vocalists."

Ellen McIlwaine is up against a wall that no woman in the music business has succeeded in breaking through. I have a feeling that she's going to jump right over it.

by john navazio

Fahey at WOW Hall tonight

John Fahey, nationally-known acoustic guitarist, will appear at the WOW Hall tonight for two shows with The Tree People.

Fahey is donating both of the performances to a fund for saving the WOW Hall, which is facing possible closure due to financial problems.

Tickets for the concerts are \$5, and are available at the WOW Hall, 291 W. 8th Ave. The shows start at 8 and 10:30, and the doors will open at 7.

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