

# WILLIAM LEE ELLIS

## BIOGRAPHY

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Acclaimed Americana/Blues guitarist **William Lee Ellis** was raised in the deep roots of American music. Named after his godfather, legendary bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe, Ellis grew up in a musical family – his father, respected banjo composer Tony Ellis, was one of Monroe's Blue Grass Boys.

Growing up in the Kingsport-Bristol-Johnson City cradle of country music, Tennessee native William Lee was immersed in roots music heaven at an early age – some of his earliest memories include trips with his father to visit old time music master Tommy Jarrell, and being bounced on his godfather's knee. It was only natural to take up the guitar, and Ellis spent his adolescence backing his fiddle-and-banjo-playing dad at bluegrass festivals and contests across the country.

In college, Ellis took his musical studies in a new direction, spending the better part of a decade playing classical guitar and earning a master's degree in classical performance from the University of Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music. While there, Ellis chanced upon a musician who would change his life: Piedmont blues giant Reverend Gary Davis. Folk-blues revivalist Andy Cohen introduced Ellis to Davis' intricate finger-picking style, which fascinated the classically-trained guitarist. "Davis was both a brilliant sacred musician and bluesman, and that's a mix I love dearly in pre-war traditional and folk music," Ellis says. "A combination of the heavenly and the hellish, full of tension, drama and gut-hitting emotion."

His discovery led Ellis to other bluesmen – Blind Blake, Lonnie Johnson, Blind Willie Johnson, and Willie McTell. Soon, Ellis had a band of his own, the Midnight Steppers, an acoustic Delta/jug band/rockabilly group co-led by longtime collaborator and compadre Larry Nager. In the late '80s, the Steppers performed regionally at festivals and on such national radio and TV programs as NPR's Mountain Stage and TNN's Nashville Now.

Along the way, Ellis learned to combine Davis' finger-picking technique with his classical performance background and the bluegrass-infused memories of his youth. Yet it's clear that he's no revivalist – Ellis writes his own unique music, using old blues forms and apocalyptic gospel themes as a vocabulary to express contemporary experiences. In his quest to capture the timeless appeal of pre-war traditions, and to make the music's message live for today, Ellis has created a brand of Americana/roots music that's all his own.

Ellis' recordings have been hailed by the international press from *Billboard* to the *London Times*: his five albums include 2000's *The Full Catastrophe*, and 2003's *Conqueroo*, picked as one of the year's best records by *Acoustic Guitar* magazine. Most recently, he recorded *God's Tattoos*, set for release in July 2006, with acclaimed producer Jim Dickinson.

Ellis resides these days in Memphis, and recently ended a nine-year stint as the pop music critic for the city's daily, *The Commercial Appeal*, in order to focus on his music career while working towards a PhD in ethnomusicology at the University of Memphis. Among Ellis's writing honors are a 2002 Keeping the Blues Alive Award for print media and a 2004 first place Arts & Entertainment win in the Missouri Lifestyle Journalism Awards, the oldest and best-known feature writing accolade for American newspapers. He also co-produced with Larry Nager the Handy-nominated album "Big Joe Jumps Again!" by Cincinnati blues piano master Big Joe Duskin.

Ellis is an avid world traveler – recent European tours include Italy and Germany, Austria and Switzerland – and teacher, having instructed blues guitar at the prestigious Common Ground on the Hill workshop as well as Jorma Kaukonen's Fur Peace Ranch. With his banjo-composer father, he's also played Cuba and Belarus for the U.S. State Department, the Kennedy Center, MerleFest and The Late Show with David Letterman in a performance with actor Steve Martin. Summer 2006 will see Ellis traversing the US in support of *God's Tattoos*, with dates scheduled on the west coast, southeast, and east coast.