



Valerie and  
Benedict  
Turner

Photo by Bibiana Huang Matheis

## Piedmont Blues

Duo keeps alive traditional acoustic music

By Raymond Mora

**W**hen Valerie and Benedict “Ben” Turner set out to perform acoustic blues music as a duo, they hoped to have as much impact nationally as internationally. Husband and wife, they go by the stage name Piedmont Bluz Acoustic Duo, referencing the Piedmont blues tradition of rural East Coast African-Americans in which they specialize. They already may be having the impact they hoped for, with performances to date at festivals, concerts and other venues in the United States, Israel and Spain, and more requests coming in. “We want to share this music, this special music with the entire country and, of course, internationally,” says Ben. “The interesting thing about this music is, it’s very popular outside of the United States. People are seeking us out, they’re just contacting us via the Internet and asking if we are available to come over and perform in different countries.”

The couple met more than 30 years ago on the sports circuit — ice and roller skating, snowboarding, skiing. Valerie, a New York City native, was

already playing the guitar. She had been drawn to country blues after a chance reading of a book about the genre and subsequently seeking out other blues musicians. One of the musicians who crossed her path was John Cephas, the legendary acoustic blues guitarist. Cephas taught her to understand and play country blues songs until his death in 2009. Before his passing, he asked her to keep the music going. “I think that’s what really got me into performing because before that I was just studying for my own pleasure. But being asked to sort of be a torchbearer, to help be part of the musicians that keep the music alive, that kind of propelled me onto stages,” Valerie said in an interview with *The Network Journal*.

Ben, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, joined Valerie on stage as a harmonica player and percussionist, playing mainly bones and Darlington washboards he designed and made himself. Some of their songs date back to the early 1900s, a time of great difficulty for Blacks recently freed from



Darlington musical washboards designed and built by Benedict Turner.

### SUMMER 2016 PERFORMANCES

July 1: Dave Van Ronk 80th  
Birthday Concert  
Brooklyn, N.Y.

July 10: Summer Sundays  
Jackson Heights, N.Y.

Aug. 6: Sugar Maple Festival  
Morristown, N.J.

Aug. 17 – 22: Augusta Blues &  
Swing Week  
Elkins, W. Va.

Sept. 1 – 4: Harvest Time Blues  
Festival  
Monaghan, Ireland

slavery, when freed men sang them in unison as they worked to keep going at a steady, rhythmic pace. The lyrics recount the African-American experience, stories of good times and bad.

The duo’s goal this year not only is to keep the music tradition going at home but also to spread it in Europe, with summer bookings in New York, Wisconsin, West Virginia and Ireland. Valerie also plans to teach at blues camps in West Virginia and Washington State this summer, where teachers and students come together for a week to be immersed in the music using different instruments. “When people look on the stage, they’ll know that there are people that look like me and that look like them, who are still interested in engaging in this music and want to help preserve it in a very authentic matter,” she says.

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