

## Oregon singer to headline Durand blues festival

By Troy Espe  
Leader-Telegram staff

In her formative years, Ellen Whyte appeared destined to play the accordion.

But then she discovered that the accordion was cool in elementary school. Not so cool in high school.

"I was in the accordion band for nine years," Whyte said during a telephone interview from her home in Oregon City, Ore. "Then I dropped the accordion because I was socially ostracized. It wasn't cool to play the accordion at 15."

Whyte switched to guitar, which eventually inspired her to become a blues singer.

"In high school, I got very interested in Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday and B.B. King before he was really popularized by U2. I was following him around when he wasn't all that fashionable. I just thought this guy is just a blaze of glory to hear him play the blues like he does," she said.

Whyte will headline the inaugural Blues on the Chippewa festival Saturday in Durand. The free event will feature nine bands. There also will be camping, concessions and a classic car show.

Whyte will perform with Eau Claire group The Sue Orfield Band.

"She's the neon blonde of blues," said Orfield, a tenor saxophonist who will play with three bands during the festival. "She's a fantastic performer."

Orfield and Whyte met in the mid-1990s at a blues festival in Washington state. This will be the third time Whyte has toured with Orfield in the Midwest.

"I love playing with Sue," Whyte said. "When Sue and I are on that stage, we are throwing down some serious musical heat."

Whyte is promoting the album "Four Way Stop," released July 4. It's her fourth disc but her first since 2001.

"This record is by far the best of all the albums that I've ever released,"



Oregon singer-guitarist Ellen Whyte will headline Blues on the Chippewa festival Saturday in Durand.

**Contributed photo**

she said. "Maybe the seven years was a good time to pause, reflect, get some introspection and perspective on life."

The disc features 11 original songs written by Whyte, guitarist Garry Meziere and Whyte's husband, John Mullin.

"There are themes imbedded in this recording that reflect an emotional landscape that's remorse, fear, love and strength," Whyte said. "These songs are a little bit darker than what people are used to hearing on our records."

Born in New York, Whyte grew up in Florida and lived there until her parents died when she was 15. Living in foster homes, she moved to North Carolina and then to Connecticut, where she graduated from high school.

"No matter where I went, that guitar didn't go without me," she said. "I was always with an accompaniment, whether it was camping or hanging out at somebody's house. I just surrounded myself with music."

Whyte joined the Army after graduating from high school in 1973. During three years of service, she joined a bluegrass gospel group, a punk rock band and a Motown revue.

"Since I was the only blue-eyed soul sister in the band, we called it A Dash of Salt," she said.

Whyte moved to Oregon in 1978 after a divorce. She raised two daughters and earned a degree.

The Pacific Northwest has an overshadowed but vibrant blues community, Whyte said.

"Little by little, I started checking out the music scene here," she said. "I never lost sight of that creative juice that courses through my veins."

In 1995, she formed the band Reflex Blue with Meziere. Her husband also plays in the group.

Whyte's diverse musical background surfaces in her albums and live shows. She even busts out the accordion at blues concerts.

"I'm a vocal stylist," she said. "I like singing all forms of music, and I like the challenge of being able to authenticate all of them with my voice."

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