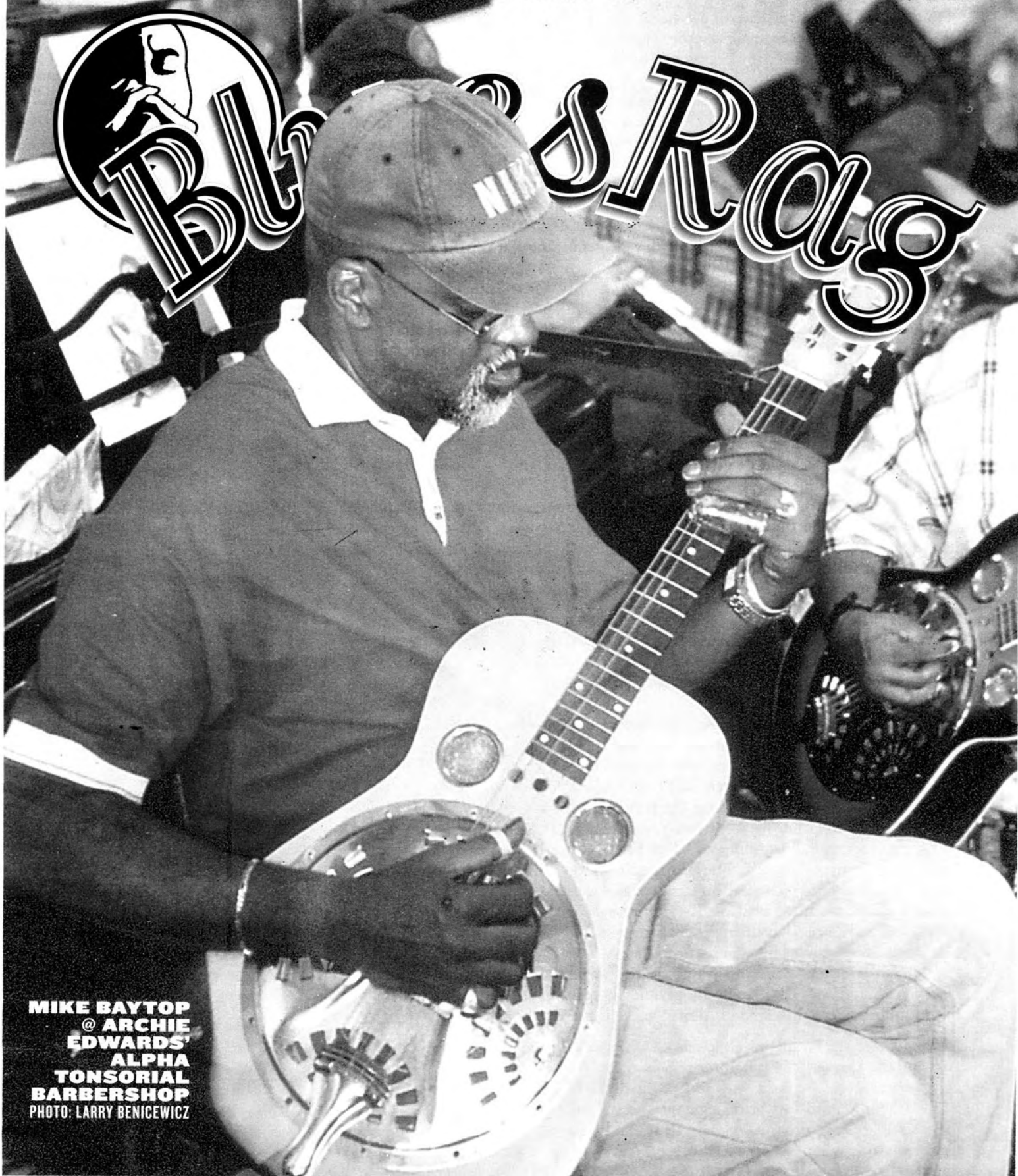


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**MIKE BAYTOP
@ ARCHIE
EDWARDS'
ALPHA
TONSORIAL
BARBERSHOP
PHOTO: LARRY BENICWICZ**

SAVING ARCHIE'S BARBERSHOP PAGE 6

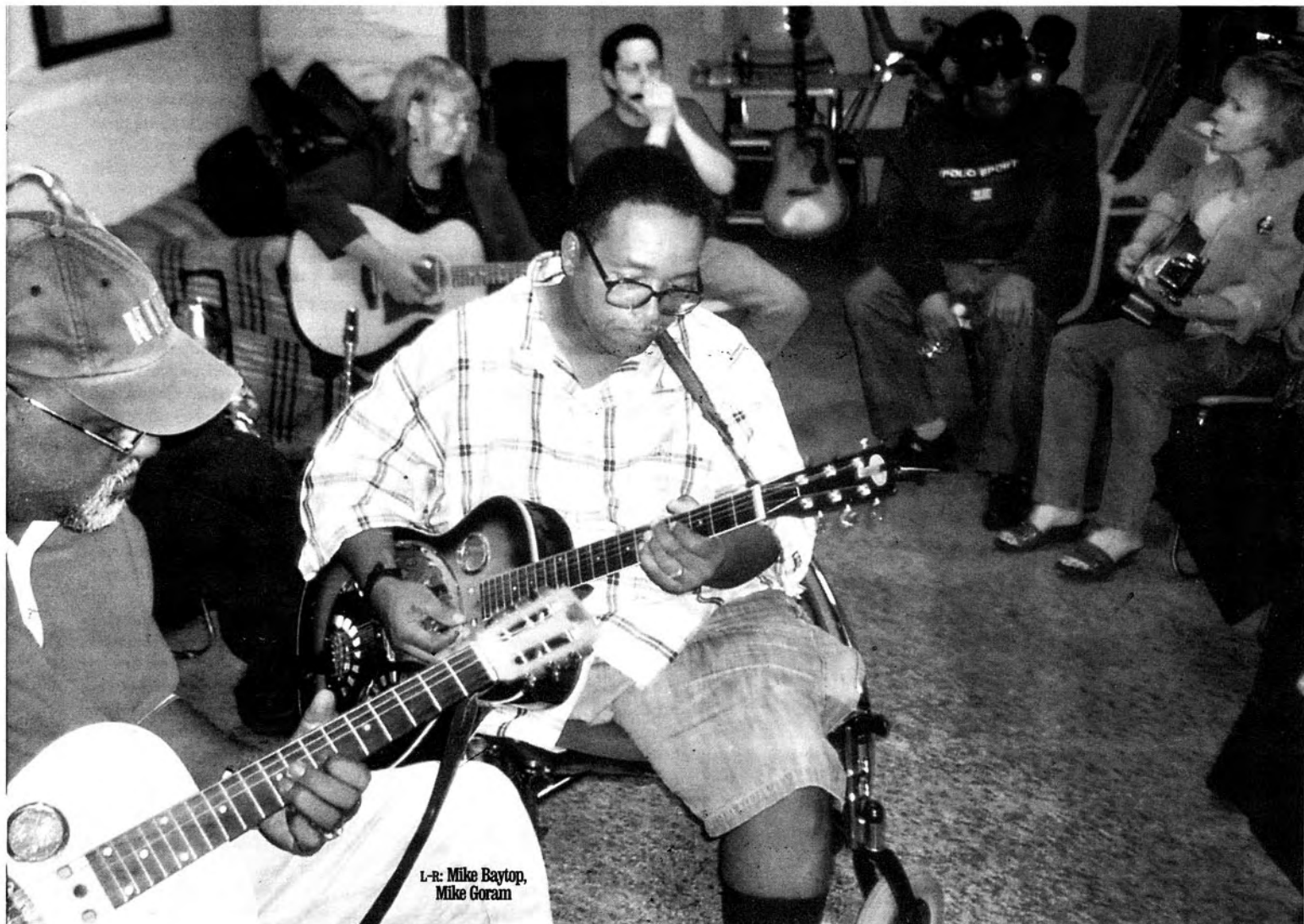
SAVING ARCHIE'S BARBERSHOP

STORY & PHOTOS BY LARRY BENICEWICZ

AREA BLUES FOLLOWERS have probably heard or read about the imminent demise of what had become a local blues shrine of sorts—the former hair cutterly of acoustic guitar wizard, Archie Edwards, who died of cancer at 79 on June 18, 1998. For the last eight years his fellow musicians, protégés, students, and friends had managed to pay the rent, taxes, utilities, and insurance on this humble store front at 2007 Bunker Hill Road in NE Washington, D.C. so that they could reunite on Saturday afternoons and enjoy a half-dozen hours of a blues jam session in his honor. In the beginning, it wasn't such a difficult task to meet the expenses. At Archie's passing the rent was a pittance, a mere formality of \$100, which could easily be met by passing the hat at the four scheduled Saturday séances. And even since then it had grown incrementally to only a monthly fee of \$300, well below what the market could bear and still a reachable goal for the members of the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, a non-profit, tax exempt organization dedicated to keeping the guitarist's spirit alive. However, lately, there had been some ominous developments. The trustees of the aged erstwhile owner, Helen Loftus, finally decided to sell the shop. And anyone familiar with the red hot real estate speculation of Washington knows all too well that such bargains for tenants have long become a thing of the past. For a while, things definitely did not look very promising as far as its continuance as a blues rendezvous.

Archie's Barbershop,
Bunker Hill Rd.



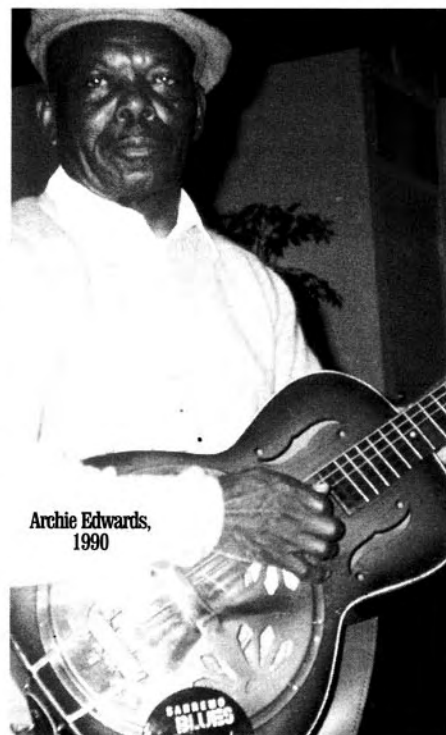


L-R: Mike Baytop,
Mike Goram

Well, I'm happy to report that the Alpha Tonsorial Barbershop (its official name) has been given at least a temporary reprieve. One of the relatives of Michael Baytop, the Foundation's president—Jeff Sibert, himself a former coiffeur, has tentatively agreed to buy the property as well as the adjacent enterprise in the commercial strip, which he will then rent out at the current rate. Sibert has intentions to renovate the 40s era hair parlor with the funds derived from its neighbor, thus maintaining the status quo. As magnanimous a gesture that this is (Sibert's been hailed as a savior by some members and perhaps rightly so), it still calls for some changes, including raising the monthly payment to a more realistic level, but still well under the normal figures for such an establishment. Aside from this new financial worry (more about this later), there is anxiety among Archie's legions of fans about the fate of the barbershop itself, a museum to Archie Edwards which was left virtually intact after his death, containing artifacts and relics of his half-century of use—vintage radios, a black and white TV, a stack of 78s, various trophies, and of course, the chair. On the walls are faded posters, yellowed articles, plaques, and well-worn record jackets. Would its cozy ambiance remain after such an

extensive overhaul? Somewhere down the line, I'm certain this issue also will have to be addressed. But for the immediate future, the barbershop has dodged the proverbial bullet.

Not being a habitu e of the shop when Archie was alive, the average reader may not be as sympathetic as I regarding its ultimate destiny. However, despite the long round trip from Baltimore and inevitable traffic tie-ups, it was always worthwhile to pay Archie a call, because on any afternoon I would likely meet some important figure connected to the blues, be it national or local, be they scholars, pundits, or musicians and, of course, get all the scuttlebutt first hand. Cutting hair was Archie's hobby, not vocation. A World War II veteran, he took advantage of the GI Bill to earn a professional barber's certificate in Richmond. But he toiled here thirty years for the U.S. Government from 1951-1981 and worked at the shop evenings during most of that tenure (beginning in 1959). The hours of the salon, even after he received his pension, were very informal—"Open Saturdays"—a hand written sign would say. The longtime resident of Seat Pleasant, MD, would arrive at the shop in the morning at no specific time and about 2 p.m. or so, especially if a "pilgrim" had



Archie Edwards,
1990

BARBERSHOP

CONTINUED

L-R: Archie Edwards, John Jackson, 1990



arrived, interrupt his hair styling chores to pull his trusty guitar of choice out of its case—a resonating steel pan Gretsch—and serenaded the customers (who, like Archie, seemed unhurried and for the most part enjoyed the impromptu exhibition) with some of his classic Piedmont blues numbers. I was always in awe of this unique finger picking style typical of this genre which is so daunting to most musicians, involving simultaneously sustaining a bass pattern, a rhythmical accompaniment, and melodic note selection, all within a tight harmonic structure. And Archie could play with the best of them, including good buddies (the late) John Jackson and John Cephas, both frequent visitors to the shop, as well as latter day exponent, Dan Stevens, of Old Lyme, CT, who still joins the blues jam when in town. Yes, Archie Edwards relished holding court daily in his personal clubhouse—the Alpha Tonsorial Barbershop.

Upon entering Archie's place, you could then and now sense the presence of many departed blues greats, such as the legendary guitarist and mentor, Mississippi John Hurt, who lived not far away at #30 Rhode Island Avenue after having relocated to Washington, D.C., in 1964 and thereafter acquiring a regular gig at the fabled Ontario Place in Georgetown. Archie's boyhood hero, Hurt, counseled him and inspired him to become a professional. Then there was street singer and guitarist, Flora Molton, who routinely showed up unannounced. Normally (when not on tour) ensconced on the corner of 11th and F Streets NW beside the display window of Woodward & Lothrop until the time of her

death 1990, Molton was instrumental in introducing to Archie German talent scout and promoter, Axel Kustner, who after paying a call to the blues hangout and hearing an audition, taped a primitive field recording there in 1979. Released in Germany, it would be Archie's first LP, *Living Country Blues, Volume 6: The Road Is Rough and Rocky*. But other now deceased bluesmen of note have passed through the portals of Archie's shop, especially during the many Smithsonian Folklife Festivals held annually on the Mall in Washington, D.C., like Son House, Skip James, and Blind Gary Davis. And Furry Lewis was said to have dropped by after an appearance at the Howard University Blues Festival of 1970. Yes, there are ghosts galore inhabiting this unassuming workplace.

Aside from the historical nature of this location, which warrants preservation as a long time focal point for musicians and educators, is the idea of creating a monument to the memory of Archie Edwards both as an artist and human being. As the former, because of early, negative experiences in which he felt exploited by the music industry, including dealings in the 60s with local producers such as Lillian Claiborne who ran the DC label and released his first and only single, "The Road Is Rough and Rocky" bw "Circle Line Boat," and Gene Rosenthal of Adelphi, who included him on an anthology, he developed a life-long antipathy to recording. And when one considers the full extent of his career, he remains highly underrepresented on vinyl or CD. Aside from his Kustner LP, he only appears on another German compilation, a



concert recorded by Horst Lippmann in 1982 when Archie was part of the American Folk Blues Festival in Frankfurt with Carey Bell, Cephas & Wiggins, and James "Son" Thomas and a 1991 Mapleshade (56592) project, Blues N' Bones, wherein he is aided by the Nighthawks' Mark Wenner on harp and the late Richard "Bones" Thomas (another regular) with his characteristic, idiosyncratic percussion. Through the intercession of the Foundation, his best material has been issued posthumously (2001) after having moldered in the vaults for nearly twenty years—*Archie Edwards: Toronto Sessions* on the Northern Blues label—a CD that the Foundation sells in order to defray expenses. According to most sources, many such outstanding efforts still exist and may yet see the light of day. So, it would be incumbent on such an organization to keep his recorded legacy in print, since this matter never seemed important to Archie. Had he been more ambitious in recording, more self-promoting, and more aggressive in marketing himself, he may well have been more of a household name in blues circles. And someone by now would have petitioned the government to declare this site (not a bad idea) as a candidate for the National Historic Register. Thus, such an ongoing support network as his would probably have been superfluous.

The high esteem in which he was held as a musician by his peers was only equaled by the high regard they held for his character. Yes, he was affable, self-effacing, unpretentious, and a true gentleman of the old school. But few musicians could match his kind-

ness and generosity, especially to the Baltimore and DC Blues Societies, the latter of which he was a founding member. In short, he would refuse no request to perform for a fundraiser or other worthy function and either play for free or for a stipend well below what a musician of his stature was entitled. In fact, his last performance was only a few months before he died, when he entertained the pupils at Carter G. Woodson Elementary School in Cherry Hill in South Baltimore as part of the "Blues in Schools" education program. Had Archie been either less of an artist or less of a man chances are that no one would have made much of a fuss about preserving for posterity an otherwise non-descript hair salon.

It didn't take long for the Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation to take wings, especially with the cooperation of Archie's immediate family and a host of volunteers, musicians all, like charter members Eleanor Ellis, then secretary and now archivist, the aforementioned Mike Baytop, who had played there a dozen years before Archie's death, Neil Harpe, Kevin Canning, Miles Spicer, now treasurer, and Dion Thompson, a former reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*. Soon the 1:30 Saturday jam became an institution and was often joined by local celebrities like guitarist Warner Williams and harp man Jay Summerour of a Little Bit a Blues and Cephas & Wiggins, another dynamic duo, which helped spread the word. Its notoriety was helped in no small measure by several documentaries, including spots on PBS and Fox News, and those produced by Finnish, Israeli, and Japanese film crews, as well as a

prestigious Keeping the Blues Alive Award from the Blues Foundation in 2005. Over the years, word of Archie's barbershop has been disseminated by publications such as the *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Blues Review Quarterly*, and *Living Blues*.

I talked recently to Michael Baytop and asked him to give his appraisal of the most recent turn of events. "Well, I can't say exactly that we were saved. We just bought some time," he confessed. It was true that with the additional rent imposed, albeit reasonable, it might be a little harder to meet the deadline employing the conventional means—weekly contributions, concerts by various configurations of members (a trio appeared at the recent Baltimore Book Festival in Mount Vernon), and sales of merchandise such as posters and CDs, including those of members; the aforementioned CD of Archie's; a 2003 tribute CD of Archie's favorite songs, *Archie's Barbershop Blues*, executed mostly in house by many of the regulars; and a November release, a compilation, *Songs of Peace & Forgiveness*, by area artists including Mike, Eleanor, Gaye Adegbalola (from Saffire the Uppity Blues Women), and Phil Wiggins, all who provided their services gratis. Both Eleanor and Mike both agree that, to survive long term, the Foundation must find a way to attract new recruits, especially professionals who can write grants and proposals or have expertise in soliciting money, perhaps even to the extent of uncovering government funding. Both point to the time of a particular crisis when an amateur harmonica player turned up at the jam one Saturday and inquired whether he could help them, since he, as a

lawyer, had experience with setting up nonprofits. The firm of this Jeff Glassie in fact worked pro bono to the tune of about \$7000 to finally secure this designation for the Foundation. But it's obvious that more such benefactors will have to step forward in order to allay the concern of this nucleus of individuals entrusted with perpetuating this grand tradition.

But in the meantime, if you are in a particularly adventurous mood, don't be bashful. Grab a six pack and come visit the weekly party. Pull up a chair. Everyone is welcome here from all walks of life and everyone, if he or she so desires, can be a player, even if the instrument is a rub board or wash tub bass. This is not a competition and no one will be judged. And if you brought nothing and still want to participate, Jim Lande, the horn man, on request will gladly lend you a couple of his home-made wooden "bones" as rhythm sticks. Or maybe you can just be content to add a voice. But whatever you do, don't forget to, at least, hit the "tip jar," a coffee can labeled "Donations," on the way out, so that this celebration of Archie Edwards's life can abide. Anything you can spare will be greatly appreciated. Personally, I can't think of a more noble cause around which our two blues communities can rally. Thanks in advance.

P.S. Please direct all contributions to: The Archie Edwards Blues Heritage Foundation, P.O. Box 10124, Washington, D.C., 20018. To buy any CDs or merchandise, please consult their website: www.acousticblues.com or e-mail them at info@acousticblues.com

