

JOANNE LAUTERJUNG · JULY 13, 2020

Elise Witt

– SINGERS ON THE FRONT LINES –

Singers on the Front Lines is a series of interviews with singers working to promote wellbeing, social justice, and sharing the gift of song with vulnerable communities. Subscribe (below) to receive notifications of future posts.

“I know, for me, my job on this planet is about connecting people and singing is how I do that.”

—Elise Witt

*Elise Witt is a singer, songwriter, musician, teacher and arts activist with a passion for languages and building bridges through music. The child of survivors of Nazi Germany, Elise uses her music to promote causes of peace, justice, and human dignity in her own community as well as globally. Born in Switzerland, raised in North Carolina, and making her home in Atlanta Georgia US, Elise has served as a cultural ambassador to South Africa, Nicaragua, China, Italy, and Yugoslavia. She is a member of **Alternate ROOTS**, a coalition of artists based in the Southeastern United States, whose work is at the intersection of arts and activism. A lover of languages, Elise*



Elise Witt: singer, songwriter, musician, teacher and arts activist

All Singing
Elise Witt

is fluent Italian, French, German, Spanish, and English, and sings in over a dozen languages. Her original songs are wildly eclectic, and she continues to collaborate with musicians from around the world. Since its founding in 2009, Elise has served as Artist-in-Residence and Director of Music Programs at Atlanta's [Global Village Project](#).

SonicBloom: Welcome, Elise. Please introduce yourself and say a little bit about what you do.

Elise Witt: Greetings from Pine Lake, Georgia in the United States, just outside of Atlanta! I've been a full-time musician since I started working, and I've combined the two passions of my life, which are language and music, into what I do for work. I lead community singing here in Atlanta and on tour.

I also teach in schools and have been an artist-in-residence and traveling artist for many years. I go to communities, anywhere from a week to even months, working with schools and community groups to introduce music from many cultures, and also write songs with students and community members. Recently all of that energy has come to focus on my work at the Global Village Project, a special purpose Middle School for teenage refugee girls with interrupted education, and the girls come from Afghanistan, Burma, Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic. I [also] use American Sign Language to teach English. So, my life's work

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has become a marriage of my passion for languages and my passion for music. I was born in Switzerland and my first language is German, but I've been in the United States and at [the age of] four I discovered how interesting languages are, so I decided I wanted to learn all the languages in the world. Of course, I'm far from that goal, because there are more than 1,000 languages just on the continent of Africa! But I'm still working on it, and my students are a big help.



An Impromptu Glorious Chorus™ workshop at Alternate ROOTS Weekend, Eatonville, Florida, USA. (Photo by Lily Keber)

SB: Well, I think you've made an impressive dent in that goal! Where does your love of languages come from? Does it come from living in different countries, that your parents come from different countries, or . . . ?

EW: When we arrived in the United States I was put into nursery school, and all the little children were running around and making weird sounds that I'd never heard before. They were speaking English and it just sounded strange to me, and I didn't know what was going on. I did something which I think is weird, but they say is what a lot of children

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six months in school. And then I started speaking English. And what happened for me was that I realized how the two languages I knew, English and German, not only had different sounds, they were like different [kinds of] music. And there were different ways of saying things, different expressions that were untranslatable. And I realized that as you learn a new language, you're really learning a whole new way of expressing yourself, and a whole new vocabulary of sounds. I was just fascinated with language. After that I wanted to learn French, and French led to Spanish in high school. And then in college I got excited about Italian, and started a lifelong love affair with Italy. I've spent a lot of time there and have close friends, and also teach and do concerts. The languages I speak fluently are German, English, French, and Italian. But thanks to my students at the Global Village Project I'm learning bits of Swahili, bits of Karen, bits of Malay, Kinyarwanda, and more.... I [go] to a large farmers market here in Atlanta, and many of the people that work there speak Amharic, spoken in Ethiopia and Eritrea. I have some students from Ethiopia and Eritrea, so I like to surprise them and try out new words.

SB: I know there have been studies linking language skills and the ability to learn music – there's a connection with how musicians learn to listen. I'm curious to know if your parents were musicians. Did you grow up in a musical house?

EW: Yes, very much. My father was a scientist and farmer. but he also

composers.

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– ELISE WITT

played the cello, and had been playing the cello since he was a boy. He grew up in a very interesting household – his mother’s family was Mendelssohn and they had house concerts there on Sundays. People would come from all over Berlin, for jam sessions like we would have now. Albert Einstein sometimes came and brought his “fiddle.” My father said he wasn’t very good! My father tells the story of how he and his sisters and brothers would watch from the upstairs balcony, and Eleanora Duse, a famous opera singer, would drink a raw egg yolk in a glass of red wine to oil her throat. So, my father grew up in a household very rich [with music]. My mother also grew up in a musical family and loved the piano and singing. Her family lived in Frankfurt, and her father was a dentist. Sometimes he would barter with his patients who couldn't afford to pay him, and one of those patients was Henny Rosenstrauch. She was a student of [Jacque Dalcroze](#), who created a system of teaching music to children [using] movement and rhythm. When we moved to the United States, Henny had also immigrated from Germany, and she told my mother, “You should go back to school and get your teaching degree and become a Dalcroze teacher.” So, after [being a] French teacher when we first arrived, my mother started teaching music.

Both my parents liked to sing duets, and my mom played piano and recorder. They would have jam sessions with their friends

colleagues of my dad, and my sister and I would run through the house trying to escape the classical music.

SB: That's funny, and quite the lineage, quite the heritage, there. I know from listening to your music, I can hear so many influences and I'm curious – what instruments do you play?

EW: I grew up playing piano – I was forced to take lessons until I was 16. I studied cello for one year, but that didn't really stick. I was taught to look at what Pete Seeger calls, “fly specs and hen scratches on the paper,” and learned how to translate that into my fingers to play the piano. But now I wish I had been taught how music works, you know, like, “Oh, look at this – isn't this cool? This is a diminished chord, and it can ascend or descend in a musical progression.” I wish music teachers taught us to look at the whole pattern of music, how it works. That's something I've been learning later in life. I got a guitar for my high school graduation. My voice is my primary instrument, but I do play a lot of guitar to accompany myself and I use the piano for composing.

There's a retreat center for artists and scientists here in North Georgia, the [Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences](#). In 2002 I received my first residency there. And when you go there, they give you a cabin and leave you alone. Residents can spend anywhere from two to eight weeks, and four evenings a week we were served dinner at the main house. At dinner I had the opportunity to meet

artists and scientists working on a wide variety of projects, but other than that, I was just left alone to work. I was given a cabin with a huge dance floor, a grand piano, a tiny bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. And I thought, “Well, I won’t pick up my guitar for a week and let’s see what happens if I just play the piano, where I can see what music looks like right there in black and white.” I started composing songs on the piano, and a lot of songs that I’ve written since then have been written on piano.



Street singing in Little 5 Points, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. (Photo by Jessica Lily)

SB: I can relate to that. I think every instrument teaches us something new about music theory. I started on piano, and it wasn't until I tried to learn guitar that I learned about more about chord theory. Classical piano didn't teach me about chord theory.

So, to link your musical past and present, I'd like to ask you about the phrase, 'singers on the front lines.' What does that phrase mean to you?

EW: Well, I've been thinking about it, and it's interesting because I

want to immediately deconstruct [the phrase] and turn the line into a circle, and then turn the circle into a spiral because I feel like a line is . . . linear. [Laughs] Singing in community for me is singing in a circle. A circle is a very powerful shape – it's the way we connect with each other. We don't lose each other with a line going out in either direction, but we're actually connecting around the circle. I often think about singing out my ears instead of out my mouth, because when we're standing in a circle, we're connecting with the people next to us. What goes on in our brain, in our body, is that we're learning. If we're singing a song, for example, we're learning words, we're learning rhythms, we're learning melody. All of that happens in our brain. We get that into our body, and then we connect with the other people in our group that are singing the same thing to create perfect union. And to do that we have to create sound waves that exactly match each other. [If you've ever had the] experience of singing with someone with who isn't quite in tune, you can feel the vibrations actually bumping into each other. But when we're singing in unison, we're literally matching each other's sound waves and creating sounds in unison. In community singing we're also hearing people on the other side [of the circle], singing a different part. We're creating harmonies and those sound waves are moving together in a "pleasing" sound. "Pleasing" is a really subjective and cultural idea because there are many ways of singing

sound beautiful and natural, and to other cultures it sounds strange and weird. So, we're creating these harmonies with waves that are intersecting and meeting. It's not just the individual person and their voice, but actually hearing how all those parts fit together into one sound.

When I'm teaching and we're in a circle, I often let people take turns stepping into the circle, being quiet and just listening. It's moving your ears from one part to another, almost like going inside the sound, and hearing how it all comes together. There's something so incredibly powerful about that, the act of listening, and the act of hearing how it all comes together. And then coming back in, being able to hold your own part, the part with your group, hearing other people and hearing what you're creating together. I think about [Bernice Johnson Reagon](#) [singer, composer, scholar, social activist, and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock], when she was [interviewed by Bill Moyers](#) a long time ago. She talked about how, during the Civil Rights Movement, when they were in a church, knowing the police were coming with their dogs, the KKK was coming, there was danger coming, and they literally changed the molecules in the air by singing. I think that's what singing does. It changes the molecules in our bodies, and it changes the molecules between us, among us and around us. And we create this incredibly powerful sonic environment that has the power to change things

SB: It's interesting how frequencies influence other frequencies. I recently learned that scientists at MIT have mapped out the frequency of the Coronavirus, turning those frequencies into music, and they're looking for counter frequencies as a way to "neutralize" its harmful frequencies.

EW: Wow, that's really fascinating. The realm of the musician is the realm of vibration.

SB: I want to go back to what you were saying about deconstructing the phrase 'singers on the front line', and the word, 'line' or 'front line.' You're right - I picture music as a frequency that does influence what's around it, that pulls you in and draws a circle and spirals around. And also, when I think of the 'front lines', there's sometimes a demarcation telling us something's not quite right. Either there's conflict or war. I think about your students, coming to this country at a very tender age - middle school can be such a difficult time. There are so many changes going on for them, within themselves let alone being refugees and having to deal with a whole new culture. And we've got COVID-19 right now, and we're isolated. I feel like the 'front lines' are referring to these tension points where music could melt the line, and turn it into a circle and a spiral.

EW: I've actually written a song about that.

SB: Of course you have!

EW: It's called, Spiral. Would you like to hear a little bit of it?

SB: Yes, please.

Spiral Song
Elise Witt

EW: It's really about language and music.

SB: I love it. I love it. When you said, "revolution," I thought revolutions per minute, you know, 'revolution' to literally go 'round and 'round. That's how language gets used, the associations we have with it.

EW: And if you think about revolutions in history, you know, political revolutions pretty much come right on back to where they started. The minute people get in power, they take power and are corrupted by power. So, it's a sad part of our human history.

SB: Right, true. Thank you for that song. So, continuing the theme of 'front lines,' what's happening on your front lines right now, and what role does music play? It seems like your music with Global Village Project is educational too, and has a social intention to it, beyond you as a singer-songwriter and performer.

EW: Yeah. When I had just finished college in North Carolina, I got a job at a Greek restaurant that was across the street from the theater department of the university. I was working at the restaurant because I wanted to learn Greek, which didn't really work very well because the guys there only taught me swear words. [Laughs] But all these kids from the theater department would come over and they were super flamboyant – they were just so theatrical and entertaining. Then I

read an article about Rebecca Ranson, a playwright who was doing theater at a women's prison in North Carolina. Joan Little was one of the women being held in that prison and was a *cause celebre* within the Progressive Movement. Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote a famous song about her as well. At the prison in "Little Washington NC, with Rebecca Ranson, the inmates were creating theater about their lives and their situations, and I had this revelation about how there were two things that were both called 'theater,' but they were nothing like each other. One was the theater across the street that was flamboyant, centered around entertainment. And then there was theater that was actually telling the stories of the lives of these incarcerated women. It's so powerful, changing the vibrations in our bodies and in the air around us. That led me to get involved in an organization called Alternate ROOTS, a coalition of artists whose work is at the intersection of arts and activism. I have been a member since 1978, and it became my family of artists. That family has schooled and trained me to be an artist activist. I'm still very involved in Alternate ROOTS. They have a grant program called Partners in Action that funds work in communities to help expand services, and they have supported my work at the Global Village Project.

A lot of my work now focuses on the Global Village Project, and over the past 11 years we've created an arts-integrated curriculum. The

underlying goal of the school is for students to learn English. But, of course, hand-in-hand with that, is to help them acclimate and get their feet on the ground in this strange new place that they find themselves. I use singing to teach English, and teach a lot of songs from the global peace and justice repertoire. I also learn songs from the students. We say that “every teacher is a student, and every student is a teacher.” So, I find I learn as much from my students as they learn from me.

GVP This Little Light of
Mine
Harry Dixon Loes

We also write a lot of songs. For example, I'll ask the math teacher what they're working on in Math Class. If they're working on fractions, we might write a song about the different rules of fractions. We brainstorm together to come up with a chorus, and then break into small groups to write verses. When you're part of creating something, when you're part of making a song, you will remember it forever. And, you know, we might write a really complicated song that has seven verses, or even 17 verses, but they will remember it forever because they were part of the creation process. We wrote a song about affixes. I didn't even know there was such a thing – affixes are is the collective word for suffixes and nrefixes. Now, it's sort of a

weird concept to think about, but the students that wrote that song, they're always going to know what suffixes are, and what prefixes are.

SB: Yes, that idea of creating together.

EW: So, we're learning language, but we're also using the language that we learn to make something. And we make it together, and we're making it in community. It's a really fun process, which has now turned into a really strange process because we're all online. I'm teaching my community singing classes online, and it's really weird, but it's also really powerful because it's still a way of connecting with each other in this time when we can't be together live and in person.

I taught my community singing class last night, and it was just so lovely to see the people I've been singing with for years. And Global Village Project is all online as well. The school has done an amazing job of adapting so quickly to this new situation, with all the students at home. Each student has a tablet, they have headphones and microphones. I'm working on a project right now with the girls which is very challenging, to make a video of the girls singing a song that one of our music volunteers, Elliott Ray, wrote called, "I Can Make A Home." It's a beautiful song and the girls really love it.

[Elise later noted that there will be a video of it soon! Her friend, [Lea Morris](#), is helping her make it.]

SB: Yes, it's a whole different beast. What I find really interesting is that on social

media, it seems like every second or third post is a choir or music video, or someone in their bedroom singing a song. I'm really fascinated with how we're consuming and creating music in this time. I'm more inclined right now to click on a friend's video from their living room than a slick and highly produced video. It's less than perfect, but I feel more connected to them, to their humanness. I can relate. I'm curious to know about the girls you're working with, because many of them come from so many different cultures with different musical traditions. What are you observing about your students? Are they turning to music in this time? What are some of the different cultural responses that you're seeing that involve or don't involve music?

EW: Well, that's actually a question that I have posed to them. I asked them to send me a link of a song that has been comforting or powerful for you them in this time. I was hoping I would get a lot of music from their cultures and in their languages, but I'm getting more In English. It's interesting. There are some really beautiful songs that I've been introduced to, which I love. There's an artist I had not heard of before named [Tatiana Manaiois](#). Her lyrics are very powerful and very encouraging. One of the girls sent me a video of hers last night, and we decided we would use it in class this afternoon for a dance party.

One of the things you're asking about is the importance of music in different cultures. All the students love music, no matter what culture they come from. They love singing, they love dancing. Most of them are

amazing dancers. One of the most powerful things about our school are is the friendships that are made across cultures. As you said, middle school is such a vulnerable and delicate and scary time for anyone. As a teenage girl, this is probably one of the most important times of their lives. We're now in our 11th year, so we have students who are now graduating from college. But they're still connected to their friends from Global Village Project. We've started an alumni program and it's really taking off.

Our last day of school we had a "drive-by parade". The staff went to all the different apartment complexes where the girls live. We decorated the cars, and went by, just to let them know that we're so sad that there couldn't be a real graduation. They didn't get to do all the things that you do to mark that that big transition.



Parade for Global Village Project students during COVID-19 to mark the end of the school year. Atlanta, Georgia, USA (Photo by Dean Hesse of Decaturish)

SB: Well, the parade sounds wonderful.

can help mark the end of such an important time in life.

A bit of a technical question – why use music to teach English? You said if they write a song, they'll remember it forever. I don't know if you've ever read Oliver Sacks or Daniel Levitin, they've both done a lot of research and written a lot about music. For example, music lives in the oldest part of our memory. Alzheimer's patients will remember songs from their childhood long after they've forgotten the names of their children or their spouses.

EW: Yeah. When I was doing a lot of artist-in-residencies, and working at senior centers as a visiting artist, I had a friend who was 95, and there was a woman who was 102. They remembered all these songs. And what's so powerful when you go in somewhere like that, and you start singing songs from their era, there are people there who may be sitting in a wheelchair that have not moved at all. They look like they're not mentally there, and when that song starts you might see a finger start to keep time, you might also hear a voice that starts singing. And, you know, miracles happen with that. It's very, very powerful.

SB: So, memory seems like an obvious reason to use music for teaching. If there's rhythm and melody, new information will go into that part of our brain where we'll remember it longer. Are you finding other benefits to teaching with language with music? And they're learning so much more than language. They're learning skills, and how to be in the world, and how to be in this foreign land.

EW: Well, we've heard that music is in certain parts of the brain, but I recently learned that music is actually in every part of the brain. So, no matter what we lose, music is still there. One of the things we do in music class is sing in harmony. When we're learning our own part, we're learning other parts and how things fit together. But one of the things that the girls love to do is conduct. I teach a lot of rounds because a round is something everybody can learn quickly, and everybody learns the same melody. Then when each group starts at different times, we create instant harmony. Some people think rounds are really boring, but there are amazing rounds that have been written by people like [Becky Reardon](#), [Joanne Hammil](#), and many more. So, when we do a round at the Global Village Project, three students volunteer, very excitedly, to conduct. And when they become the conductors they're very strict. In class, they might be sitting, lounging and, you know, leaning back in their chairs. But when they become the conductor, it's, "Okay, we're going to stand up!" And the students always follow the conductors - there's no question about that! So, there's this way of being a leader, when it's your turn to conduct, of creating the group. I love being able to step back and let them take the lead. Because every student is a teacher, and every teacher is a student. Also, we use a lot of American Sign Language, which is really beautiful. I use it quite a lot for teaching and it let's the song become a dance!

SB: That's very Dalcroze of you. We've been talking about the positive ways that music is powerful, and I want to ask you about music as a tool for indoctrination. I think about armies marching in lockstep, or propaganda songs. I know you end classes with the girls reciting some values and principles. You want students to be in sync with each other to create trust and a supportive environment. But I'm wondering how you find a balance between being mindful of the girls and where they're coming from – culturally, spiritually – and supporting their own development without them feeling pressure to believe in a specific set of principles?

EW: Yeah. It makes me think of the practice you and I share, which is the work of improvisation. We've been studying with our wonderful teacher, [Rhiannon](#), and yes, there's music where we learn songs, and we create harmonies singing together. But there's also the element of improvisation, and that is, I think, the element of freedom. A lot of times people are scared of improvisation because they think it's just taking a leap into the void, into nothingness. I think that improvisation is that beautiful balance between structure and freedom. And I think that's one of the roles of teaching – to provide structure, to give songs, to provide possibilities. So, we're learning how music can be made. But I've also realized that every song is like a springboard for creativity. In so many traditions, especially for example in the African American tradition, any song can be an invitation to add a creative expression. How do I fit into this

song? Where is there a space in the song for my voice?

SB: So, it's that balance between structure and freedom. I remember visiting your school, and you invited me to teach a song. And I didn't attribute the song to the right person, and you very politely, and very supportively, corrected me. You knew the history of the song, where it came from. You make sure if you're presenting a song that's not your own that you know something about that. I think that integrity and sensitivity go a long way in modeling good leadership.

EW: Yes, well, that's something I've learned along the way. One of my most important teachers is [Dr. Ysaye Maria Barnwell](#), who was the bass singer in [Sweet Honey in the Rock](#), and who's still a force of nature. She grew up singing next to her father in church, who was a bass singer. She learned the bass part, but then she learned every other part as well. And when she teaches, she teaches all the parts from the bottom up, from the foundation. She always emphasizes knowing the music, where it comes from, something about its life. For example, knowing the difference between a Spiritual and Gospel music. I feel it's really important to do your homework and that's what we're here for – for each other. Actually, what's happening now with all of this virtual online singing is we're helping each other, and learning from each other. I'm finding sources of songs that I didn't know where they came from, which is exciting. And also, it's providing a platform for us to learn songs from young composers. There's so much

exciting music happening right now. There's no geography anymore. In my Monday night community class, I have people from Chicago, Florida and North Carolina along with my regular Atlanta folks. And on Saturdays, I've been participating in an online community sing led by Maggie Wheeler from the [Golden Bridge Community Choir](#) in Los Angeles California. She invites 3 or 4 other song leaders to share music and there are as many as 300 people from all around the world!

SB: I'm curious, especially in this time of COVID-19, is there someone who's inspiring you right now, who's singing on these front lines, or front spiral?

EW: Yes. I met a singer online from Alexandria, Virginia named Lea Morris. when she and I were invited to co-lead an online community singing circle with Elizabeth Melvin, founder and director of [The Freedom Choir](#) in Annapolis Maryland. And I was so taken, with Lea's style of leading, as well as the songs that she's writing, and the way that she uses traditional songs. I find her so inspiring – her spirit, her composing, and in the way she's embracing technology. She and I are talking about some collaboration!

SB: Wow, fantastic. I look forward to reading up more about her. OK, last question. Is there anything else you want to say about the role of music right now?

EW: Well, the technology is really challenging me. I'm not someone who really enjoys that part of it. I could have just said, "Let me just pause here and step back and not

would continue my local Atlanta class. Which is not only local, because geography no longer matters, but I see how important it is for people. People say, "This is the best part of my week." And I have to admit, it's also the best part of my week, connecting with people. We're singing together, but we can't all listen to each other at once. It's also a way of exploring what works musically in this strange format. And there are moments where we can leave pauses that other people can fill in. There are ways of looking at the technology, ways that singing with other people can work. I think the bottom line is, we're hungry for connection, and it's providing a way for us to continue to connect. Last night in my class people were so, so grateful to be there. And it's funny, because if you're in a choir or a big group, you can get lost and just kind of follow along with other people. But in this format, you're really hearing yourself and the leader, and people are surprised and enjoying hearing themselves, and playing with harmonies, playing with unison, playing with improvisation. Just getting a chance to be expressive and play and see what happens. There's a lot that we're missing, but there's also a lot to discover. And I think staying connected with each other is what's so important. I know, for me, my job on this planet is about connecting people and singing is how I do that. It's not what I do. It's how I do what I do.

SB: That's beautifully said. Elise, thank you so much.