

Although Eaton spent several years playing at Blues Alley in Georgetown as part of the house band, had his own jazz group for four years at the defunct Mayfair Club downtown and has played with Tom Cecil at the Prime Rib, he prefers solo.

"It's freer," he says. "If you're playing with somebody else, you have to make concessions. My creative juices respond to playing alone. You don't have to consider somebody else's taste. You consider your taste, your feeling of what is appropriate and what your audience wants." Many jazz pianists ignore the sustaining pedal, but Eaton puts it to maximum use.

Between sets, Eaton works the room, chatting with fans. "That breaks down the artificial barriers that exist between a performer and an audience," he says. At the same time, he is cautious not to lose the objectivity that separates performer from audience. "That's why I don't

like piano bars. There has to be a little distance."

Years of playing in lounges have prepared Eaton for performing in other settings, such as his current series of concerts at the Smithsonian, which combine performing and lecturing.

Eaton awakens each day around 10, teaches piano for two to three hours and practices his own technique for another three hours between his lesson schedule. He practices classical tunes rather than the contemporary ones he plays in the evening. "It keeps my mind alert. I can see growth in my playing," he says, attributing his progress to his New York teacher, Alexander Lipsky, from whom he still takes lessons twice monthly.

On Sundays, his one night off, Eaton and his wife of four years, Penny, a writer for Time-Life, may head to Blues Alley, as they did recently to hear George Shearing. "He's the musician's musician," says Eaton, "because he loves what he does and he loves his audience."

Eaton was playing "All the Things You Are" at the Carriage House in Georgetown one night four years ago when he felt someone sit down next to him on the piano bench and start playing along. His first reaction was annoyance, but the music sounded good. He looked over and saw Shearing. A close friendship was ignited.

Eaton acknowledges that his work is difficult on his family life. "Musicians make notoriously bad husbands because of the crazy schedule and trying to reconcile any kind of normal lifestyle, plus the fact that music is a jealous mistress," he says.

His wife, who plays the piano, comes to hear him on occasion. His two children from a previous marriage are both very musical, but don't intend to pursue it professionally. His daughter, 16, plays the flute, and his son, 14, the guitar.

Eaton plans to stay at the Fairfax as well as continue his Smithsonian concert series. He dreams of keeping Washington as a home base while taking his act on the road. He has had a "few nibbles" from public television (outside Washington), and would like to find a corporation to subsidize a traveling show that would be both entertaining and educational. He would also be interested in the college circuit.

Eaton has released two albums: "It Seems Like Old Times" and "John Eaton/Solo Piano," both on the Chi-proscuro label. He recorded a third, yet to be released, live for a new label at the Atrium last summer.

His concern for communicating with people as well as his love for playing has kept him going. He went through a moralistic period, when "I felt I wasn't doing anything for humanity by sitting in lounges and encouraging people to drink." But now he sincerely feels that he's doing worthwhile work and helping to perpetuate good music.