

Winter's Tale

JOHNNY WINTER

Towards the end of October Johnny Winter paid his first visit to Britain for two years. Despite the long absence, he was pleased to find that his fans were still loyal to his wild electric blues playing: 'I was a bit worried whether people had forgotten me after two years, but they hadn't. I don't make any money in Britain, but I like it here and I believe in coming for the people who've bought my records and who dig my music. It's a pity more American musicians don't feel the same way — if they can't make a big profit from a tour, they're not interested.'

On the evidence of his London concert and an 'Old Grey Whistle Test' appearance, Johnny's music hasn't changed much: it's still exciting rock and roll, with a firm foundation in the blues. Does he feel any pressure on him to keep his music popular? 'Somehow you have to keep your fans and at the same time play stuff that you feel advances you. I usually play half a set of what people want and expect to hear and half of where I feel I would like to be going. The set's always changing. I never keep it the same. There is that pressure of keeping a good set, not letting things get stale, gig after gig. But at least these

days I'm not doing vast road tours.'

Just before his British trip, he added another guitarist, Floyd Radford, to the group, but he felt it was too early to say what effect this would have on the Winter sound. 'I didn't want just a guitar player, I wanted someone who can write. And I think Floyd can write good music. At the moment, I'm playing the same stuff on the guitar as before, and he's fitting in around it. But maybe when he's written some material, we'll work it out together and my playing will adapt to his a little.'

Although Johnny's music has always centred around the blues, his first musical experience was listening to jazz, and his first instrument the clarinet. 'My father played sax and a little banjo. He was very much into jazz and that was the music I first heard. I was hearing people like Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw; so when I was six I was at the clarinet. But my teeth got crooked and I gave up. I found a ukelele around the house and started playing that — my hands were still too small for the guitar anyway. But when rock and roll came along I noticed there weren't too many rock and roll ukelele players, so I thought I'd better start guitar.'

The first one I messed about with was an old classical guitar that belonged to my grandmother. It had a horrible bowed neck, but I learned a few chords on it and just played around.'

But he fancied himself in the role of lead guitarist, and soon acquired a Gibson ES 125, a big fat 'cello guitar with one pick-up and no cutaway. 'I used to play with my brother Edgar and we always used to battle about who played lead. I'd say, "I want to do the fancy bits! I'm not a rhythm player," and even now my chords are my weakest point. I know enough to get by, but mostly I play guitar as a lead instrument.'

By the age of fourteen he was playing in groups at school hops and 'having some good times with Edgar'. But not playing blues. It's an understatement to say that there wasn't much scope for a white boy who wanted to play blues in Texas in the late 50s. 'I actually played a lot of country stuff — Chet Atkins is still one of my favourite guitar players — but really there wasn't much choice. The audiences at hops were full of red-necks.' But his interest in blues was already aroused, first by rhythm and blues and Chuck Berry, through the Chicago

Tony Jasper

Photos: Jeffery Pike



blues of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, and finally back to the roots. He discovered the music of Robert Johnson and Son House and began to incorporate it into his playing. Which made him a rather exceptional youth: 'My friends wouldn't believe that I liked that stuff. My parents managed to put up with it somehow, but they didn't understand what it was all about. When I told them I was going to be the greatest white blues guitarist, they didn't pay too much deference . . . yes, I knew I had a bit more than most people. I could sing in key and no-one else could most of the time. I knew it was going to happen. By the time I was twenty-five I was still waiting! I said "Why am I so cool and so starving?" But I still knew I was going to make it.'

In fact, Johnny didn't come across any white people who liked blues until he was 24 or 25. But before that he'd been playing in black clubs, listening and learning and even once jamming with B B King. Parallel to his development as a musician, he was experimenting with electric guitars: 'I had a white Stratocaster, two Les Paul Customs, and then a Fender Mustang. I really loved that one: it had a different sort of tone from the other Fenders, more biting. I had an Epiphone which I liked, but the sound wasn't really strong enough. Then he discovered the Gibson Firebird, which has been his favourite guitar ever since. He likes the feel of the Gibson bridge and neck, and the trebly, cutting, Fender-type sound. At first he used the tremolo arm for his blues vibrato, until it became the fashion to play with a strong finger-vibrato: 'I used to get the sound like Bobby Bland and B B King using the tremolo bar; but then Clapton and those guys came along, and if you wanted to be cool you had to use your fingers. It's a strange fashion thing, because there are still some things you can do better with a tremolo bar, like a downward vibrato, or chords. Anyway, I taught myself to do it with my left hand, and then I got to take off the tremolo bar from the Firebird because it affects the intonation a little, and it sometimes gets in the way too. I've got four Firebirds at the moment: airlines have a

habit of breaking guitar necks in transit, so I like to have a few spares!'

One remnant of his country-picking days is Johnny's continued use of a thumb-pick. 'I learned to play that way and by the time I realised the drawbacks, it was too late. I suppose I could get it down with a flat-pick, but it would take time and my playing would be below par for a while. I'm too old to change now!'

The beginning of Johnny's recent London set was plagued with sound problems, despite the regulation checks of roadies and sound crew before-hand. Johnny reacts with exasperation: 'Sound people drive me crazy. You just never know when you walk on stage what it's going to sound like. You can go crazy hiring and firing them, but that's energy-sapping and things usually sort themselves out.'

When he was getting his style together, Johnny used to practise awful hard: 'I was obsessed with the guitar, I guess; I just used to sit and play for eight hours a day — up until the time I started to work with a group. Now I can sometimes go for a couple of weeks without touching a guitar, but when there's an album to be recorded or a tour to do, I get the band together and we rehearse hard for a couple of weeks. So most of my practice now is for a particular reason. Like if



I'm working on a new tune, or if I hear something that turns me on and I try to learn it.'

What sort of thing does turn Johnny Winter on these days? Apparently not much in the contemporary scene: 'I still listen to people like Robert Johnson — I learned so much from listening to his slide playing — and I dig the stuff that Clapton used to do, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck when he feels like it, and of

course Hendrix. But that's all from some years back. I don't hear too much music today, but there seems to be no one around who deserves that much listening to, except maybe John McLaughlin, he's doing interesting things. I don't think it's just a question of getting old and sticking with the scene I knew. I still like the old rock and roll records, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Carl Perkins and people like that. Then there was so much tripe around early in the 60s, awful stuff by Frankie Avalon, Johnny Tillotson, Fabian, you know? Then the blues thing happened and people like Clapton appeared and woke the music up . . . and now it seems to have fallen asleep again. So I still listen to the old records.

'I used to meet more guitarists a few years back when Festivals were the thing, but not very much now. I still like to turn up in a small club with my guitar and jam with the band there, but the fact that I'm so well known — and so distinctive! — sometimes makes that difficult. It's cool to have people recognise you in the street . . . but when you're sitting in a restaurant and just putting your spoon to your mouth, you don't want to hear someone saying "I'm sure Mr Winter wouldn't mind signing one more . . ." Before you know what's happening, there's a queue!' ●

