

# life Music

## Edgar Winter's wonderland

By Peter Jones

Edgar Winter has fond memories of growing up with his brother Johnny in the melting pot that boiled along the Texas-Louisiana border, a musical hotbed where the Winter boys got their first taste of blues, R&B and country. “You had the French Cajun influence, Zydeco, you had the rhythm players and the intelligent jazz players,” Winter said. “We’d go to the Raven and see B. B. King. It’d be 5,000 black people and we’d be the only white people there.”

And when Winter says “white,” he means white. For two albino kids who stood out like a solar eclipse in a black hole, “color” was a relative term, especially with a last name that conjured a season of freshly fallen snow.

Amid racism, the Winter boys found common ground among black musicians and musical outcasts of all stripes, reveling in the Texas culture where Lightnin’ Hopkins and Ernest Tubbs played the same chords but performed on different stages.

“I just didn’t get it when I was young,” Edgar said of the racism that surrounded his childhood. “My parents taught me to believe we were all equal. There was a lot of prejudice, but not so much in the [blues] music world.”

As two albino teens growing up in southeast Texas, the Winters were accustomed to the social outskirts, but found easy solace in the underground music community where they both excelled, on saxophone and keyboards in Edgar’s case and on guitar and oddly enough, ukulele in Johnny’s.

“Anytime you look different, you’re going to get teased, but music was my own sort of pri-

vate escape world,” Edgar said. “I didn’t see well enough to play sports and do what the popular kids did, but Johnny and I were kind of cool in our own way because we were doing something that the other kids couldn’t do. There was definitely a feeling of taking the road less traveled.”

For nearly a half century Winter has continued to integrate the worlds of rock, blues, jazz and more, often at his own expense commercially. His travels will bring him to Capitol Hill Dec. 14 when the iconoclast joins Eddie Money and John Cafferty in what promises to be an unpredictable evening at the Ogden Theatre.

Born in 1946 to musical parents, Winter began formulating his diverse musical attitude at a young age. By the time he and his brother were toddlers, they were already making music with their banjo-picking father and pianist mother. At ages four and seven the boys were harmonizing to Everly Brothers’ songs on the local “Uncle Willy” radio show.

“Music was a family thing and I thought everybody played instruments,” Edgar said. “I didn’t realize until I started putting together a band around the neighborhood that the other kids couldn’t play. I was like, ‘What? Your daddy didn’t show you no chords?’”

While teenage Johnny became a sought-after blues guitar hero, baby brother Edgar was seeking out his own musical identity. With no need for a second guitarist in the family, Edgar mastered everything from electric bass to alto sax, fusing Johnny’s passion for blues with his own wide-eyed interest in jazz, rock, country and classical.

Winter played many of the instruments himself on his critically praised debut album before founding the aptly named band

White Trash and moving in a horn-infused jazz/R&B direction. Next came the harder-rock based Edgar Winter Group, a band that variously included Rick Derringer and Ronnie Montrose, whose debut album, *They Only Come Out at Night*, went platinum in 1972.

“I like a variety of music and I made eclectic albums,” Winter said. “I could have been vastly more successful if I had just focused on one thing. But that’s boring.”

He scored his share of hits in spite of himself, most notably with “Free Ride” and the instrumental “Frankenstein,” which began life as a lengthy concert staple.

When Winter was forced to offer up a shorter single version of the untitled jam, he painstakingly stitched together bits and pieces of various longer takes to harrowingly create what would become his “monster” hit.

“Back then, the only way to edit was physically with a razor blade,” he said. “Tape was lying

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## Music

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all over the control room, draped over the backs of chairs, and we were trying to figure out how to put it all back together. Then the drummer mumbled the immortal words, 'Wow, it's like Frankenstein!'"

When "Frankenstein" came alive on Top 40 radio, Epic Records charged Winter's gate like torch-carrying townspeople eager for more. The label brass was soon asking the artist to follow up with... perhaps "Dracula" or maybe even "The Wolfman."

It was a horrific request, as far as Winter was concerned.

"They're always looking for a hook," the musician said with some bemusement. "They want a song that sounds like the hit and about three or four more songs that sound like that song, and then they put it all together and call it a cohesive album."

Instead, Winter's records

offered up a determined eclecticism, while he also became known for his energetic stage presence. To accommodate, he created a body strap that allowed the wild-man keyboardist to move freely about the stage.

"That came from my frustration with being stuck behind a big bank of keyboards. I need to get out there and jump around and work up a sweat," he said.

Little has changed in the decades since Winter first blew in. As the musician finally ages into his trademark locks of flowing white hair, the 65-year-old has no intention of slowing down anytime

soon, or ever, for that matter.

"I have that bluesman mentality," he said. "When I'm 80 or 90, I still expect to be playing. It's such a huge integral part of my life, I can't imagine giving it up. You'll never hear Edgar Winter talking about a farewell tour. I'm a Texan. I'm going to die with my boots on."

Edgar Winter will perform Dec. 14 at the Ogden Theatre with Eddie Money & John Cafferty. For more information, call 303-832-1874 or visit [www.ogdentheater.net](http://www.ogdentheater.net) or [edgarwinter.com](http://edgarwinter.com). Contact Peter Jones at [pjoneslifemusic@aol.com](mailto:pjoneslifemusic@aol.com).

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