

Johnny Winter is alive and well — and coming to

BY JIM WORMINGTON
For The Courier News

Brace yourself for a Winter storm guaranteed to be hot. It will blast its way into West Dundee's Clearwater Theater on Saturday, Dec. 29.

This Winter's first name is Johnny, and he's a much-respected blues/rock guitarist with an illustrious history of accomplishment and many accolades in the music world, including having a song written for him by both the Rolling Stones and John Lennon (*Silver Train* and *Rock and Roll People*, respectively).

If "real" blues arises, at least in part, from personal suffering, Johnny Winter can confidently claim his place among the great blues artists.

Born a cross-eyed albino, John Dawson Winter III can certainly be placed in the category of a minority. Growing up in rural Texas in the 1950s and '60s, Winter felt the pain of outright cruelty from people when they encountered someone "different."

His parents encouraged his early interests in the clarinet and ukulele. But when he inherited his grandpa's guitar — around age 12 — he held the instrument that would ignite his soul's creative passions and ultimately launch a career spanning more than three decades.

Winter wandered into black neighborhoods and clubs — despite the high racial tension in those days — to drink in a thrilling new discovery, still called "race music" then.

If Winter's differences were impediments, clearly, he overcame them when he was seized by a burning drive to play and perform the blues.

He learned how to hold a guitar from taking lessons — the rest he learned from the records of Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf,

B.B. King and Muddy Waters. He listened to all of the best black bluesmen and absorbed their deeply felt music with the obsessed delight of a true fanatic. Winter's vision problems made reading music an unrealistic proposition, but whatever he may have lacked in technical knowledge, he made up for with heart and determination.

Building on what he learned from these players, Winter constructed his own style of playing and singing. With gravel in his vocal chords and dirt in his guitar sound, Winter sped up and shouted out the blues.

The '70s would see him share the stage with Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Jefferson Airplane, Frank Zappa, Steppenwolf, Santana, The Byrds, Canned Heat, John Mayall, Donovan, Hot Tuna, Country Joe and scores of others.

With one foot in the blues and one in rock 'n' roll, Winter set the stage for future Texas rockers like ZZ Top and Stevie Ray Vaughan, even while he helped bolster the career of his blues guitar idol Muddy Waters.

Winter recorded dozens of albums throughout his career and appeared on many more, acquiring his fair share of Grammys and Grammy nominations along the way.

Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo was a big hit for Winter, though it was written by one-time bandmate Rick Derringer.

In 2004, Winter released the Grammy-nominated disc, *I'm A Bluesman*.

With time for just a few questions, here's what Winter had to say in a recent interview:

Q: Which aspect of being a high-profile musician do you enjoy the most?

A: The freedom to do what I love, which is playing.

Q: Is there a style of music you like that might

surprise people?

A: Cajun, especially Clifton Chenier. (Also) Zappa, the Beatles and some Pink Floyd.

Q: It's assumed that music is your first love. Is there another pursuit or hobby that comes in a close second?

A: I used to like bowling and even did some snorkeling back in the day.

Q: Are there ever times when picking up a guitar is the last thing you want to do?

A: Never. I love playing. When I'm not playing, I'm listening.

Q: In the early years, while still learning to play guitar, can you point to a breakthrough in approach or technique that pushed your playing to "the next level" or was it just a gradual curve of improvement through practice?

A: It was learning slide (guitar) through listening to (Robert) Johnson and Son House. (I learned) the use of a thumb pick by listening to Chet Atkins and Merle Travis. And, like you said, a lot of practicing and listening.

Q: What do you like on your pizza?

A: Pepperoni! (laughs)



Legendary guitarist Johnny Winter (left) will perform at Clearwater, 96 W. Main St. in West Dundee, on Saturday, Dec. 29. Doors open at 7 p.m. For ticket information, call (847) 836-8820.

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