

Music



Johnny and Edgar Winter, back in the day.

PHOTO: Ian Dickson

Edgar Winter Honors 'Brother Johnny'

Co-Producer Ross Hogarth Helps Wrangle a Guest List for the Ages

By Steve Harvey

Edgar Winter knew that making a tribute album to his brother, Grammy-winning blues-rock singer and guitarist Johnny Winter, who passed away in 2014 while on tour in Europe, was going to be emotional. But for the most part, he says, "It was a joyous, uplifting, inspiring experience because I got to meet so many people that I had never had the opportunity to meet and play with. And they had so much love and respect for Johnny."

Brother Johnny, a 17-song album to be released on April 22, nearly didn't get made. Because Winter felt that people were pressing him to release a tribute for the wrong reasons. But then, he says, his wife, Monique, persuaded him that the time was right. "She said, 'You owe that acknowledgment to your brother, to yourself and to the world.' Without her, I doubt that I would have undertaken this project."

Then Bruce Quarto, president of Quarto

Valley Records, offered his backing. "He wanted to make it for all the right reasons," Winter says. "He loved Johnny's music."

The final puzzle piece fell into place when engineer and producer Ross Hogarth, with whom Winter worked in 2008, came on board. Winter explains: "Ross knows what works, how it works and why it works. I could not have done this record without him."

The big question then became whether to

make a straight-ahead blues record, like Johnny would have made, or a tribute based on Edgar's personal favorites.

"I tried to make it a balance of both," Winter says, "the record that I think Johnny would have wanted me to make. I never wanted to be in competition with Johnny, so I avoided the blues, but blues is my favorite music." The resulting track list reflects some of the highlights from Johnny Winter's record releases and stage shows over the years, both originals and covers, plus a couple of new songs written for the album by Edgar.

FIRST, PICK THE SONGS

Hogarth empathized with Winter's loss, he says, having lost his brother less than a year before Edgar approached him about the project in the summer of 2018. Plus, Hogarth says, while growing up, "My brother would drag me to the Capitol Theater and the Fillmore East to go and see Johnny or Edgar play. I told Edgar, 'Your brother was such a huge part of my musical childhood, and my experience of my older brother.'"

Hogarth and Winter put their heads together and drew up a list of potential songs, then set about finding the right musicians to play on them. To begin, they recorded drums with Gregg Bissonette (he and Winter perform together

with Ringo Starr & His All-Starr Band) in Studio B at Capitol Studios over the course of a week in early 2019. "I always wanted to record there. And that's such a great sounding room," Winter says.

Bissonette laid down his parts to scratch vocals and the piano tracks that Winter had initially recorded at his Winterland home studio. "I had to have a roadmap," says Winter, a multi-instrumentalist who is adept at sax, keyboards, guitar, vocals and percussion. "I also suggested lots of drum parts. I had a very specific vision for what I thought these songs were going to be. Gregg laid down such great tracks, which became the foundation of the record."

One tune that had to be on the album was "Johnny B. Goode," the song that arguably kicked off both Winter brothers' careers. In late 1959, while still in their early teens, their band, Johnny and the Jammers, won a day in the studio and a single release after placing first with a performance of the Chuck Berry classic at a

talent contest in their native Beaumont, Texas. And the rest, as they say, is history.

NEXT, CALL A FEW FRIENDS

Brother Johnny features a veritable who's who of guest musicians, too many to list here. Some had played with Johnny, some with Edgar, and many

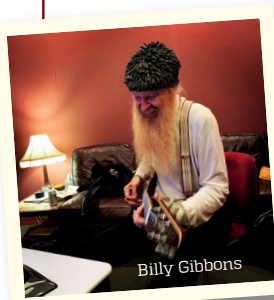


PHOTO: Courtesy of Ross Hogarth

Edgar Winter performed his vocals at home, with a signal chain set up by Hogarth: Neumann U 67 mic into a Firlotte Branch preamp into a Manley original ELOP compressor.

A Few Winter Friends

A whole lotta guest artists came down to join Edgar Winter at Capitol Studio B, all of them picking which song they wanted to guest on. Here is just a small sampling:



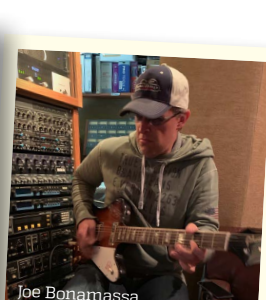
Billy Gibbons



Edgar Winter and Taylor Hawkins



Winter, Hogarth and Steve Lukather



Joe Bonamassa



Edgar Winter and Warren Haynes



Doyle Bramhall II



Winter and Bobby Rush



Edgar Winter and Waddy Wachtel



Bob Glaub



In Capitol Studio B, from left: Gregg Bissonette, Edgar Winter and producer/engineer Ross Hogarth.

PHOTO: Courtesy of Ross Hogarth



came out of co-producer Hogarth's phone book.

"Part of the cathartic nature of the record for Edgar was to be part of it, in the room with the musicians going through their experience of Johnny and the music," Hogarth says. "For me, it was also important to have a say in the sonic consistency."

In many cases, Winter and Hogarth gave the guests their pick of the song list. "When I called Warren Haynes, he said, 'You've got to set aside "Memory Pain" for me,'" Hogarth recalls. "Warren wasn't going to be able to record for quite a few months, so we set aside a day off here in L.A. while Gov't Mule was on tour so we could all be together."

"There were certain people Johnny talked about that he loved, and Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks were two of them," Winter adds. "Warren plugged in his guitar, walked up to the mic and played and sang that whole song in a single take, just the way Johnny would have done it with his blues trio. That's a rare thing."

The list of guest musicians evolved organically as time went on, Hogarth reports. "Edgar, who is a good friend of Kenny Wayne Shepherd, originally wanted him on 'Memory Pain,' but I had already committed that track to Warren, so we had Kenny Wayne rock his blues shuffle on 'Highway 61 Revisited,' and also play the solos on 'Still Alive and Well,'" Hogarth says. "The rhythm track is my dude Phil X, who plays with Bon Jovi. He's one of my best friends and one of the

greatest guitar players; he also played a burning solo on 'Jumpin' Jack Flash."

"Of all the players," Winter says, "I think Joe Bonamassa came the closest to channeling Johnny. I used to think of Johnny as the John Coltrane of blues-rock. [His guitar playing] was like an unendingly inventive stream of consciousness that built in intensity. I think Joe really captured that in 'Self Destructive Blues.' He said, 'That was the first song by Johnny that I heard. I learned that song and played it with the band.' Joe walked in with a Gibson Firebird and a Fender Bassman amp," the exact same rig that Johnny used, Winter adds.

Because the brothers lived very different lives, Edgar didn't feel that he could bring an honest vocal performance to some of Johnny's originals because the subject matter was outside his experience. "I'm Yours and I'm Hers," for example, is about Johnny's womanizing; Edgar has been married to Monique for going on 43 years. "Billy Gibbons was totally down for that one!" Hogarth laughs.

That track also features Derek Trucks on slide guitar, dueling with Gibbons' guitar. "A lot of Johnny's own productions had his guitars fighting each other," Hogarth says. "So it's honoring Johnny's production, but doing our own version."

The pair also drafted in Michael McDonald to sing "Stranger," Johnny's ballad about drug rehab. "It's a magical vocal, one of the high points of the album," Winter says. The song, the only track on which Bissonette doesn't play, features Ringo on drums and Joe Walsh on guitar.

THEN, HOME TO SING, MIX

Once the instrumental tracks were done, Hogarth says, "Edgar decided that he'd like to

cut all his vocals at home, alone, and agreed we would comp them together. We set him up with a new Neumann U 67 with an NOS tube through a Firlotte [Tree Audio] Branch preamp, and I lent him my Manley original ELOP compressor."

Edgar played piano on Johnny's 1969 recording of "Drown in My Own Tears," a song popularized by Ray Charles. "That was probably the most emotional song for me," Winter reports. "I always felt Johnny did that song for me; he knew how much I loved Ray. When I sang the song on

this album, I felt I was singing it back to him, the way he sang it to me so many years ago. I was crying my eyes out, but I got through it."

Hogarth's Boogie Motel is a hybrid facility that pairs Pro Tools with racks and racks of analog outboard, a lot of it permanently patched to I/O. "I don't have a console," he says, though he has multiple choices of passive output transformers and mix bus compressors. "I found that on this record, except for a few songs that wanted the API 2500, most of them went through the Dramatic Audio Obsidian," he says, with the highs and lows knocked down 2 or 3 dB on the Dangerous BAX EQ before the chosen compressor. "Then it went into my Pulse Techniques EQ-Pt33 Pultec mastering EQs before going back to my dedicated Dangerous DA/AD on the mix bus. On many songs, it would also go to the blue NTI [equalizer] with the Air Band."

Hogarth is a fan of too many plug-ins to mention. "But ultimately," he says, "I find that the nonlinearity of a tube and a transformer does something very special, particularly on the lead vocal. I have yet to find a plug-in that does that. On this record, once again, the Retro Instruments Sta-Level worked its magic on most of the vocals."

The project brought Winter a new appreciation of his brother, he says: "I really feel like I know Johnny better, in a different way, than I ever had before doing this record. I'd never sung a lot of those songs; it brought back so many childhood memories.

"I don't usually like to listen to my own albums, but I have fun listening to this album because it has so many guest performances. There were a lot of magical moments and incredible performances. I really dig this record." ■