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## DVD & Blu-ray Reviews

# Johnny Winter Live at Rockpalast (1979/2011)

Johnny Winter affirms his love for the blues during a premier concert appearance.



Published on August 19, 2011



### Johnny Winter Live at Rockpalast (1979/2011)

**Studio:** MVD Visual MVD184D [7/26/11]

**Video:** 4:3 (1.33:1), Color

**Audio:** PCM stereo, Dolby Digital 5.1

**No extras, no region code**

**Length:** 143:37 [Note: the artwork & other reviews list 90:00, but that is incorrect \*]

**Rating:** \*\*\*1/2

Texas blues guitarist Johnny Winter made waves on his 1969 debut album and was initially touted as a blues-based rocker similar to Jimi Hendrix. Although Winter released outright rock albums such as *Johnny Winter And* (Columbia, 1970) and likeminded songs such as “Rock and Roll, Hoochie Koo,” Winter was a blues fan first and over time has become a mature respected blues musician with a convincing impression of tradition. Winter has not abandoned searing electric music but his performances have always been tempered by his love for all manner of blues music.

That’s the side of Johnny Winter which permeates the DVD *Johnny Winter Live at Rockpalast*, an edited television broadcast of Winter’s no-frills, concert show at Grugahalle in Essen, Germany, on April 21, 1979. A large portion of the 12 tracks are blues standards by Freddie King, Junior Wells and more, played with fiery abandon, and balanced by a few assorted rock covers which Winter fans expected to hear. During the late seventies, Winter was on a mission to affirm his blues influences. During the concert Winter tells the audience, “I hope there’s some people out there that get off on blues,” and then apologetically notes, “I know we’ve got a lot of rock and rollers, but you’ve gotta remember that if it wasn’t for the blues, there wouldn’t be no rock and roll.”

Winter and his tour trio – bassist, guitarist and harp blower Joe Paris and drummer Bobby Caldwell – prove Winter’s point right from the start with a scorching 11-minute-plus rendition of Freddie King’s “Hideaway,” followed by the Chicago blues classic “Messin’ with the Kid,” originally a Junior Wells hit. Both tunes showcase Winter’s extended blues soloing, where his fingers fly across the fretboard and he bends notes, while throwing off one manic blues riff after another.

These opening cuts are just warm-ups. Winter holds nothing back on his translation of the 1950s Jimmy Rogers blues song, “Walkin’ By Myself,” a spirited paean to individualism. Paris does double duty on electric bass and harmonica, and while he blows some Chicago-inclined harp its clear he’s a long way from being a harmonica ace. Winter slows the proceedings with a lengthy version of Willie Brown’s swampy Delta number, “Mississippi Blues,” which he transforms from a country blues into a percolating electric blues cut, and gradually into a stomping, power-driven blues odyssey. Winter and his band pump up the rock edge a bit more on Sleepy John Estes’ “Divin’ Duck,” where Winter presents his six-string prowess, although Paris’ overconfident bass detracts from pure enjoyment. Not to be missed is a frenzied blues medley of Robert Johnson’s “Stones in My Passway,” Leadbelly’s “Leaving Blues” and Muddy Waters’ “Rollin’ and Tumblin’,” where Winter demonstrates his keen slide guitar skills and thorough recall of celebrated blues licks.

Unfortunately Winter and Paris switch instruments on two pieces, Willie Dixon’s “I’m Ready” and the Johnny Burnette rock oldie “Rockabilly Boogie.” Paris isn’t a half-bad Hendrix rip-off but he comes off as a poor imitation of Alvin Lee, who copied Hendrix with more finesse when he led Ten Years After. Winter does better

when he's out-front on rockers such as a groove-and-blues-flecked sprint through Dale Hawkins' "Suzie Q," although Winter's interpretation is too slow and overly long. As a finale, Winter gives the crowd what it evidently wants with a feverish dash through The Rolling Stones' "Jumpin' Jack Flash."

While it is fantastic to see and hear Winter at the top of his form, the DVD transfer is not impressive. The video has not aged well and is fuzzy (particularly during long shots), grainy, there are some noticeable video glitches at various points, and there are occasional blue streaks caused by interference from concert lights interacting with the 1970s-era video cameras. The stereo sound mix is considerably superior. The sound is sharp and vibrant with little distortion. Viewers can use the main menu to access specific tracks.

– Doug Simpson

[\* = I have found that many of the basic details on CDs, DVDs and Blu-rays at Amazon are often completely wrong - including composer and even director and casts!...Ed.]

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