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## His Saving Grace: An Interview with Johnny Winter and Paul Nelson

## By Jeb Wright

Johnny Winter found a guardian angel in his manager, producer and rhythm guitarist Paul Nelson. In only six years, Nelson has taken a rock icon that had damaged himself with drugs and alcohol, to the brink of death, and rebuilt both the man and his career.

Johnny Winter's triumphant return can be heard on his new CD *Roots*. "It was very important for Johnny to do great on this album," states Nelson. "Johnny is off the drugs and the drinking, and all of the stuff that he was on for all of those years."

Winter admits he is surprised he was able to change, "Heroin was the hardest thing that I ever had to go through. It was worth it to go through it and get clean. I am not taking any drugs and I am not drinking. I am not smoking cigarettes anymore and I am not doing anything bad. I never thought this would be possible. I never thought I would see the day that I didn't have any vices at all."

Nelson took over as that artist's manager and made immediate changes that made it possible for Winter to begin to recover from decades of abuse. "I had to wait, wait and wait until he was primed and ready. Johnny had just gotten off methadone about a year before. Once he got off that, then his voice got stronger, and his playing got stronger, and it was time to record. The music doesn't lie. That is why this is so important; this album had to be strong."

Having someone care about his health and career is something new to Winter. Johnny's old manager, Teddy Slatius, kept Winter secluded from people close to him, even his brother Edgar. "Johnny's old management kept them apart," admits Nelson. "They told him that is was not good to mix with his brother because it would not sell tickets."

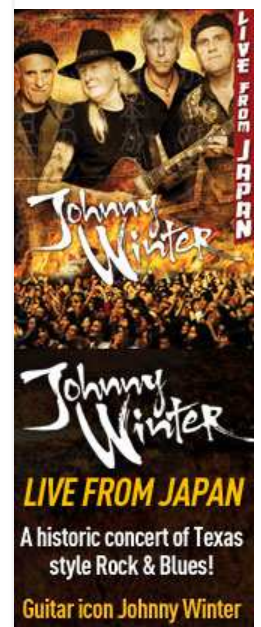
"After they fired the old management, I called Edgar and said 'Its time.' He said, 'Can I call him?' I said, 'You don't need my permission. He's your brother.' This is the kind of blockade that was put between Johnny and his brother."

Johnny confesses that if he had stayed with Slatius, it would have killed him, "I would not even be here if I had kept Teddy as my manager. He died right after I fired him. He couldn't have done anything else because he was a horrible alcoholic. There wasn't any reason for him to stay alive."

"I had terrible management. He [Slatius] didn't want me to have any friends because he was afraid that someone would say something bad about him, and everybody did. He just didn't let anyone around me. It is so much better now."

The first public acknowledgement that Winter was on the mend came when Johnny performed at Eric Clapton's Crossroads Festival. "The first one in 2006 was it. He was on the DVD. He was back with his peers and it was really good for him," explains Nelson. While it was a landmark

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day for Nelson, Johnny simply remembers the experience as a good time, "We played with Derek Trucks back then. There were so many great guitar players around that it was a lot of fun."

Trucks, a huge fan of Johnny's, is one of several guests on the Roots album. Also appearing are John Popper from Blues Traveler, Sonny Landreth, Warren Haynes, Vince Gill and Susan Tedeschi.

Nelson gets excited when talking about how he was able to get the special guests to appear on the album, "I was meeting all of these guys as we were playing. I met some of them through Johnny and we met some of them through the Crossroads show. We just started taking names and numbers two years ago. I had the concept of the album of Johnny playing traditional songs by artists that influenced him and then having guests on there who were influenced by Johnny.

"Vince Gill was the cherry on top of the sprinkle, on top of the icing. Once Johnny picked the songs then I had an idea of who would sound great on each song. 'Maybellene' was considered a country tune back in the day. It was a crossover hit for Chuck Berry. I knew Vince would be perfect for it and he said he would do it."

The Roots album saw Nelson go to extraordinary lengths to make sure every sound and note was done right. "Johnny wanted the traditional sound. The minute I found out the songs he wanted to do, I told the band that we had to go back and learn the original versions of these songs, just the way that Johnny first heard them. We also needed to learn the other versions that other blues greats did of these songs as well. At that point, we could go to Johnny and he could 'Winterize' them. I wanted to make it flow so well that you would put this in and before you knew it, you were back at the beginning."

Roots proved to be the perfect comeback album for Winter as it showcases him playing the music he loves the most. "I love playing blues," Winter admits. "I think it has more feeling than any other music. I heard blues music for the first time on radio when I was twelve years old. I started playing guitar when I was twelve because after I heard the blues I knew that I had to learn how to do this."

Johnny's roots for the blues run deep. As a teenager, Winter received his first big break when he talked BB King into letting him take the stage and play with him. "He didn't know whether I could play, or not, as he had never heard me play," chuckles Winter. "I was seventeen-years-old at the time and we were the only white people in the black club. He really took a chance. If I was in the same situation then I don't think I would have done it. He had no idea if I was going to come on and be horrible. After we were done, BB came up to me and said, 'You're going to be successful someday.'"

Winter also remembers the first time he shared the stage with Muddy Waters. "It was in 1967 at a club in Austin and we opened for him. I couldn't believe I was getting to hear him live. I just loved him."

Winter went on to produce several of Waters' most successful albums. Johnny comes to life when discussing working with one of the most important bluesmen in the history of the genre, "He was the best blues man and he made the best blues records I have ever heard. Chess didn't know what to do with him but I just wanted to make him sound like he sounded back in the old days. Muddy knew what he was good at and what he wasn't and I knew exactly what he needed in the studio."

While thrilled to see his hero healthy and performing well, Nelson confesses that Johnny's comeback is no accident, "We played a serious game of catch up. All of these other artists rode the retro wave of Classic Rock but Johnny was in bad health and he never did that. I told Johnny that he was having a serious comeback and he said, 'But I never went away.' This really was a plan. I told Johnny to get well and to stay the way he was and that I would bring him into the future.

"We did the David Letterman Show and we did the DVD Live in Japan. He had never played in Japan and we traveled a lot of places he had never been and we did all of that Bucket List stuff."

Johnny Winter Live From Japan brought the bluesman to the Land of the Rising Sun for the first time in his long career. Winter was touched by the reaction of his Japanese fans, "They were one of the best audiences that I have ever seen in the world. It was nice to go and we really had a good time in Japan."

On the DVD, Winter sits down during his performance, his body unable to withstand the rigors of years of abuse. Nelson points out that since that time Winter is getting stronger and reminds us that he was never a pillar of health in the first place. "Johnny was on drugs a long time. A



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lot of people see him for the first time and they think he is frail, but to be true, he is the same weight he has always been.

"The DVD was recorded a year ago, as of three months ago; he is now standing for three songs. Johnny has done physical therapy and he is exercising. He is walking and he has a swimming pool and he is getting healthy. He's the only person I know that as he gets older, he's getting younger."

At the end of the Live From Japan DVD, Winter looks at the camera and says, "I am going to play guitar until I'm dead...and maybe for a little while after that." It may sound like nothing more than a funny quip, but Winter is adamant that he is not joking, "I really feel that way. I don't want to retire from something I love to do. If I got unhealthy and couldn't play anymore, then I would stop, but that is the only thing that could ever make me stop." When asked if he gets nervous, now, with expectations much higher than they were in the past, Winter snarls, "I never get nervous. I just love to play."

Winter will do plenty of guitar playing this summer as he headlines the Rock 'N Blues Tour with Kim Simmons of Savoy Brown, Leslie West of Mountain, Rick Derringer and his brother, Edgar Winter.

The mention of Leslie West reminds Nelson of a meeting he had with the rock icon, "I booked a gig with Leslie West just so I could find out what it was like to get off of Methadone. I wanted to wean Johnny off of methadone. I booked this gig that made no sense just so I could talk to Leslie backstage and say, 'Here is what I am planning on doing with Johnny. How did you get off this? How did you feel? How long did it take?' We sat down and talked about it for about 45 minutes and I decided that we were going to get Johnny off of it. Johnny was on that stuff for 30 years. Nobody told him that it could be any better. I told him what I wanted to do and it worked."

On the tour, Winter will stick mainly to his love of traditional blues, throwing in a rock song, or two, as well.

Johnny prefers to be thought of as a bluesman instead of a rock star. Being a rock star was something that Winter never wanted and never felt comfortable with. "He really felt that he sold himself short from the blues when he went more rock," confesses his manager. "His most successful album, Live Johnny Winter And, he considers his worst album.

"The whole rock thing with the clothes and the stardom really got to him. He is becoming more aware of the significance of those times. In a way, with this Roots album, he really kept the Muddy Waters', the Robert Johnson's and the Little Walter's alive through his music.

"He still doesn't really understand the enormity of how his music touched other peoples' lives. People will tell him this album helped them through this, or that, but it is hard for him to absorb how the music does that.

When asked, point blank, if he realizes how important he is to the blues, Winter sheepishly states, "I am not as important as BB and Muddy, but I am one of those people who are still doing a pretty good job of it."

Johnny Winter's career is thriving in 2012 but Nelson's work is not done. "There is going to be a Roots II, he proudly exclaims. "Mark Knopfler is going to be on it. Billy Gibbons said he would do it. Clapton was on tour but he might do this one. Gregg Allman might do it and so may Dr. John. This could be an ongoing thing for Johnny."

At the end of the day, Johnny Winter owes Paul Nelson his life, his career and his future. When asked why he did this for Johnny, Nelson humbly admits, "I would like to think that anyone who is a fan, and a musician, that was in my position would do the same thing. What if I was in that shape? What if I had done all of that and lost direction and got sucked into this whole evil drug and alcohol addiction thing, who could I trust to help me and put me in the right direction?

"Every day I play with him is like a guitar lesson. Johnny has taken me under his wing and he tells me what songs to listen to and what artists to listen to and he is my little Sensei. I've got the best of both worlds and he's become a very good friend now."

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