

Guitar great Johnny Winter bringing his classic blues to The Ark

Posted: Sat, Apr 21, 2012 : 6:55 a.m.



Johnny Winter is a man of few words.

And, unfortunately, the handful he managed to utter during a recent phone conversation were largely swallowed up by the background rumble of his tour bus.

But no matter. The 67-year-old guitar giant has always preferred to let guitar do his talking for him, anyway.

And the language they speak together is the blues.

“It was the first music I fell in love with and it’s the music I always come back to,” he said. “It just has more feeling than any other music I ever heard.”

With a Grammy Award nomination for his latest record, 2011’s “Roots,” and a solid live band, Winter is maintaining a higher profile than he has for years.

And a lot of the credit for that goes to his current manager, Paul Nelson, whom Winter credits with helping pull him through a years-long battle with ill health and substance abuse, including an addiction to anti-depressants that he said nearly did him in.

PREVIEW

Johnny Winter

- Who: Guitar icon.
- What: Electric blues.
- Where: The Ark, 316 S. Main St.
- When: 8 p.m. Wednesday, April 25.
- How much: \$40. Tickets available from The Ark box office (with no service charge); Michigan Union Ticket Office, 530 S. State St.; Herb David Guitar Studio, 302 E. Liberty St.; or online from the [Michigan Union Ticket Office](#).

And it was Nelson's idea for Winter to record "Roots," which compiles some of the songs Winter grew up listening to and which informed his approach to the blues, performed as duets with a collection of blues, rock and country superstars, like Vince Gill, Derek Trucks, Blues Traveler's John Popper—even Winter's younger brother, Edgar Winter.

"I asked him to come up with a list of songs that were important to him and, in 15 minutes, he had completed the list," Nelson recalled. "So then we thought, 'Why not put a different spin on things and learn the second-generation versions of the songs and approach them from that angle.'"

Then Nelson came up with the idea of bringing aboard the guest musicians, each of whom added their own, indelible stamp on their contributions. The result is a true return to form for Winter, whose recorded output has been hit and miss during recent years.

Gill, in particular, enlivens Chuck Berry's "Maybellene," while The Allman Brothers' Warren Haynes tears it up on Elmore James' "Done Somebody Wrong."

"Nobody—not a single person—said, 'No,'" Nelson said of approaching artists to take part in the project. "As a matter of fact, after we started making calls and word started to get around, people were calling us."

The highlight of the sessions, he said, may have been Winter's collaboration with brother Edgar, who contributes some honkin' saxophone on the instrumental, "Honky Tonk."

"It was like a walk down memory lane for them," he said.

Winter said recording the record was invigorating, as was the critical response to it. He said plans are in the works for a "Roots, Volume II" during the coming year.

Meanwhile, his live show has turned increasingly toward the pure blues he grew up on and slightly away from the blues-rock fusion upon which he established himself during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Not that it matters. When Johnny Winter straps on that iconic Gibson Firebird and slides up the neck, it's always the blues.

"I just love to play the blues," he said. "I guess I'd rather play the blues than do anything else in the whole world."