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A Winter Ball: Ed Palermo helms a bluesy big band salute to '70s rock icon Edgar Winter

by **MICHAEL ROBERTS**

Singer and multi-instrumentalist Edgar Winter is best known as the man behind 1970s rock hits “Frankenstein” and “Free Ride” and as the brother of late blues guitarist Johnny Winter. But to saxophonist and big band auteur Ed Palermo, whose latest album is the incredibly entertaining *I've Got News for You: The Music of Edgar Winter* (Sky Cat), he's much more than that. In his view, “Edgar is one of the greatest living musicians. He's a freak of nature, talent-wise.”

As Palermo readily acknowledges, “I'm very passionate about my heroes' work.” And he's proven it with big-band interpretations of music by Frank Zappa, celebrated on albums such as 2009's *Eddy Loves Frank*, and Todd Rundgren, the focus of 2017's *The Adventures of Zodd Zundgren*. But Winter holds a special place in Palermo's pantheon, since he served as his bridge to jazz.

“When I was in high school, I was just a rock and roller,” he notes. “I didn't listen to any jazz — but me and my friends were all fans of Johnny Winter, because we liked blues.”

That put Edgar, then a member of Johnny's group, on Palermo's radar, and after hearing Winter's first recording as a leader, 1970's *Entrance*, he was wowed. “I couldn't believe

what I heard,” he recalls. “There was so much jazz on it, and I was amazed I liked it so much. Jazz to me was corny stuff I heard on *The Merv Griffin Show*. But I was a saxophone player, and Edgar’s sax playing was astonishing, and the songs were so cool.”

Palermo became a super-fan of Winter and eventually got to meet and collaborate with him. For Palermo’s 1982 self-titled debut album, also known as *Papier Mache*, Winter agreed to play organ and scat on the de facto title track for the grand sum of \$400. “I was just freaking out,” Palermo admits.

After putting together his big band, Palermo added Winter material to the repertoire, and a decade ago, he cut the backing tracks for what became *I’ve Got News for You* — including the seven-song suite that opens *Entrance* — with his beloved crew. But finding the right vocalists took longer. “We didn’t want a lot of Edgar clones,” he concedes.

Ultimately, Palermo chose singer Keith Anthony Fluitt to croon a couple of numbers, including the tender ballad “Dying To Live,” but mainly leaned on the talents of female vocalists such as Kimberly Davis, a veteran of Chic heard on Winter’s raucous version of “Tobacco Road,” and Vaneese Thomas, daughter of R&B pioneer Rufus Thomas, who lights up the hard-swinging title track. Thomas also delivers a jaw-slackening rendition of “You Are My Sunshine,” based on an arrangement Winter never recorded but Palermo captured after sneaking a recorder into a show as a high schooler.

Why aren’t reimaginings of “Frankenstein” and “Free Ride” in the mix? “I want to shine a light on less famous songs,” Palermo explains. “It’s the same thing I’ve done with Zappa and Rundgren. I want people to hear just how deep this stuff is.”

Among those grateful for the approach is Winter. Because he’s working on an album saluting Johnny, who died in 2014, he couldn’t contribute to *I’ve Got News for You*, but he wrote a lengthy letter of appreciation in which he expresses gratitude that Palermo is bringing attention to his early efforts, before pop radio took notice.

“It’s ironic that Edgar is doing a tribute to his brother at the same time I’m doing a tribute to *him*,” Palermo says. “He never expected anyone to do a tribute to him while he was alive, and I’m thrilled about that.”