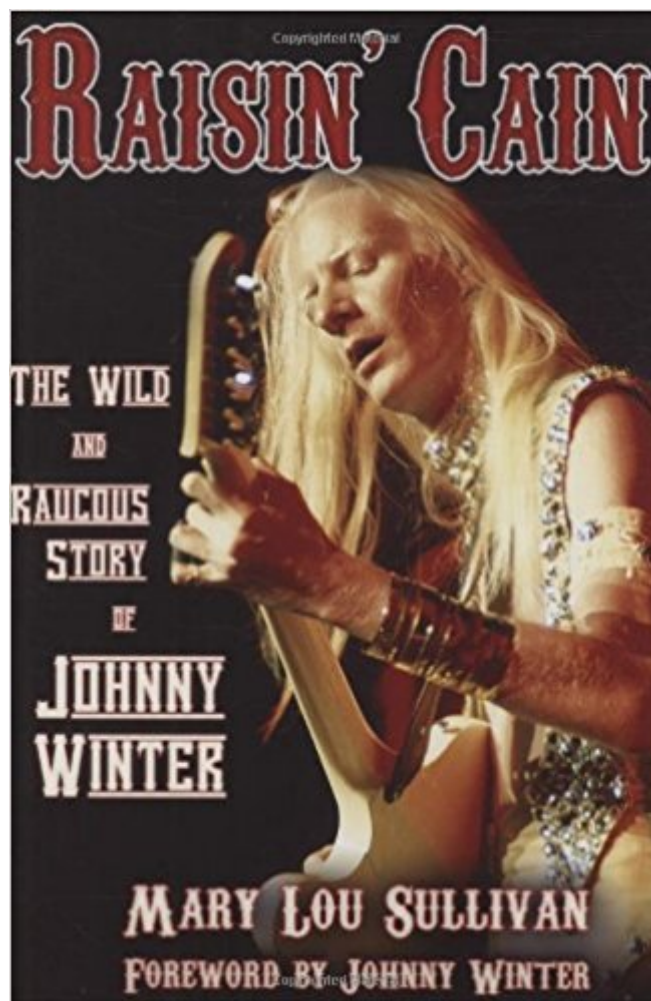


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Raisin' Cain: The Wild And Raucous Story Of Johnny Winter (Book)



Synopsis

(Book). Author Mary Lou Sullivan sat with Johnny Winter for hours of exclusive, no-holds-barred interviews, covering the guitar slinger's entire career. From toughing it out in Texas to his appearance at Woodstock, his affair with Janis Joplin, his stadium-filling tours, and washing out on drugs and the temptations of the road before finally fulfilling his dream of becoming a 100-percent pure bluesman, resurrecting the career of Muddy Waters, and winning a Grammy Award for his effort, this is a raucous roller coaster of story. Rolling Stone magazine has called Johnny Winter one of the greatest guitar players of all time. Ripped off and beaten down by unscrupulous managers, strung out, living the extreme highs and extreme lows of an uncompromising musician, Johnny is a true rock 'n' roll survivor. Signing with Columbia in 1969 for the largest advance ever paid a musician (which led to his appearance at Woodstock, recently reissued in the deluxe Woodstock Experience box set) he has jammed with guitar heavies Hendrix, Clapton, and the Allman Brothers. He is a legend and an icon, paving the way for fellow Texas superstars Stevie Ray Vaughan and ZZ Top. Along the way he has gone from boom to bust and back again, but has never lost his lust for his own brand of blues. Still on the road, playing hundreds of gigs a year to his devoted, adoring fans, Johnny, like this book, is the real deal.

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Customer Reviews

Sullivan gives Johnny Winter, the Texas blues guitar link between Lightnin' Hopkins and Stevie Ray Vaughan, an ebullient biography, tracing his passage from blues purist to rock star and back. Hailed

early for his fast and tasty guitar, Winter moved into the 1960s hard-rock mainstream by teaming with the remnants of the McCoys (remember “Hang on Sloopy”?) and recording a live “Johnny B. Goode” that rivals Peter Tosh’s reggae take as a great recasting of the Chuck Berry classic. After years of nearly Keith Richards-level drug-laced touring success, Winter returned to his blues roots in several acclaimed albums and engineered Muddy Waters’ mid-’70s resurgence by producing and playing on several of the seminal Chicago bluesman’s later albums. Sullivan may go over the top in enthusiasm, but many of the tidbits she relays, such as the story of Winter, Muddy, and James Cotton jockeying for position on the Mike Douglas show, not to mention the skinny on the semi-forgotten Steady Rollin’ Bob Margolin and Big Walter Horton, compensate pricelessly. What more could blues fans ask? --Mike Tribby

Mary Lou Sullivan is a music journalist whose 30-year career began at a dinner with Bruce Springsteen. She first interviewed Johnny Winter in 1984, a meeting that led to a close rapport that has only deepened through the years. When she’s not soaking up music in Austin, Memphis, or the Mississippi Delta, she lives in the Connecticut countryside with her cat, Pitters, and a mojo bag from New Orleans.

I’ve always been a fan of Johnny Winter’s music, but I never knew much about his life before reading this book and watching the documentary, *Down & Dirty*. I’d recommend both to anyone who has been a fan of Winter’s music. The book in particular will add the kind of depth to your experience of his music that knowing where it comes from can add. Mary Lou Sullivan was Winter’s friend, not just his biographer. And she wrote with Winter’s cooperation — he even wrote an approving Foreword to the book. In it, he says, “To whitewash my life would have been horrible. And Sullivan didn’t cover up the bad parts — the drug and general health problems, Winter’s regrettable treatment of some of his bandmates and the women in his life, and the nightmarish treatment of Winter himself by at least one of his managers (Teddy Slatius). Sullivan writes more like a friend, telling her friend’s story, than like a dispassionate journalist. I think that gives the book an emotional dimension that you don’t find in “just a biography.” The book is organized into three parts. The first covers Winter’s childhood and early part of his career. He was born into an upper middle class family, and both he and his brother Edgar were encouraged to pursue music. Their dad sang in a barbershop quartet. Johnny learned to play

ukulele, among other instruments, and listened to the family collection of pop songs (maybe explaining Winter's early recording of "By the Light of the Silvery Moon" that I've always wondered about). Of course, there was Winter's albinism. He was picked on, bullied, and that sense of simply being different gave him the personal challenges of youth that his family's comfortable economic situation didn't. Rock and roll was making its mark as Johnny grew up, and, although he was always drawn to the blues, he followed it. That tension between the commercial appeal of rock and Winter's lifelong love of the blues is a theme throughout his career. Winter went seemingly from nobody to famous musician suddenly. He joined or put together local bands for a while, like most, but when he broke he broke big. But the rockstar life seems to have undone him. Sullivan gives Winter's own account of the drugs, groupies, and the fast pace. He went from aspiring Texas bluesman to rockstar rubbing elbows and other things with Janis Joplin, jamming with Jimi Hendrix, hanging out at the same clubs as the Stones, the Doors, . . . all the gods of sixties and early seventies rock and roll. Parts one and two of the book are divided by Winter's seeking treatment for heroin addiction in 1971 and a pretty long hiatus from recording while he was trying to get himself turned around. Quitting cold didn't work, and Winter found what he thought was the solution in methadone. For a while, Winter was able to devote himself to the blues, as he'd always wanted. His collaborations with Muddy Waters in the 70s revived both their careers and really helped Winter to establish himself as a blues musician. To his great credit, I think, he tried to do similar projects with other older blues musicians who had never been paid what their work was worth. His work with Waters, and their personal relationship, was one of the highlights of Winter's life. Sullivan conveys the passion both Waters and Winter felt for their relationship. Those years, as Sullivan recounts them, seem to have been Winter's best years in some ways. He wasn't the rock star he had been, but he was doing what he loved, and he was successful. He had the standing to resist the pull from his manager at the time, Steve Paul, toward rock, as he hadn't when he was younger. In truth, I gather from what Sullivan can tell us of Johnny's own thinking, that that tension between commercial success and staying "true to the blues" was as much a struggle within Winter's own heart as one between himself and his management. Part 3 is pretty dark. All those years, even while Winter was playing the music he loved and attaining the success he sought as a blues player, he was on a very bad road. Sullivan writes that, while most methadone treatments are short term, meant to wean a user off of heroin,

Winter really just turned a 2 year heroin addiction into a decades long methadone addiction. By the mid 90s, his playing had deteriorated badly, and he lived in a fog. He was on powerful anti-anxiety medications as well as methadone, not a good mix at all. He had always been always skinny, and now he was skeletal. He had breakdowns. He spent two stretches in the hospital for anxiety treatments. He was a mess that his manager at this point, Slatius, was, according to Sullivan's account, trying to milk for everything he could get out of him. There was a four year gap in recording. The over-medication in particular seems to have been what turned the high-energy, creative Winter into the slow-moving, physically decrepit, and musically fogged Winter of the 90s. In assessing Slatius's role, we should keep in mind that he and the author had a pretty major conflict. Sullivan says, in the book's Preface, that Slatius became "threatened" by her relationship with Winter and forbade him from having any further contact with her. If Teddy Slatius is the villain of the story, Paul Nelson is a hero. Nelson extricated Winter from Slatius's grip, weaned him away from his medications (something that was still going on when this book was published), and got him healthy enough and coherent enough to make a real comeback. Overall the story leaves me with the impression that, as great as Winter was, he was never what he could have been. It wasn't just the drugs, it was also that temptation towards commercial success. If he had been able to play the music he truly loved, the blues, all his life, and had he been able to keep the devil at bay, who knows. Winter's comeback was still underway at the time the book was published. It feels a little bittersweet - it was great to see him recover as well as he did, but it makes you wish he had never fallen so far. To her credit, Sullivan doesn't cover the bad stuff up. It's not all happy, but Winter says in the Foreword, "it's exactly what happened."

I was actually disappointed in how this book was written. I loved Johnny's language and commentary--he seemed to have a great sense of humor, and it appeared he was raised in a good family. However, I read several excerpts which appeared 2 or 3 times (repeated) in the bio. I'm no writer, I keep a journal, but thought the writing was rather weak and could have been a lot better, considering Johnny Winter's great love of blues, his life-long issues of dealing with being an albino (which never, EVER bothered me--I just loved his music), altho I know many people behave in an ignorant manner re issues such as this. I almost think he could have written the book himself, particularly because of his particular dialect which I loved, coming from a large, poor family in Kentucky. I really appreciated his 'common man' appearance. I'd loved to have learned more, and I

bet johnny HAD more--I just wish somehow he could have told his stories in the manner in which I was told stories by my extended family. he had a very colorful life, and we lost a great, wonderfully-talented musician in the process.

The exciting story of this brilliant and often overlooked musician is marred by repetitive accounts of the same story. A good editor would have trimmed a hundred pages of anecdotes that are recounted identically by several participants. The author will discuss an event, then the next paragraph will feature a quote from Johnny. The next paragraph will have an identical recount of the exact same incident by someone else with no new insights. As you near the end of this book, you find yourself exhausted from having to reread the same thing over and over.

Raisin' Cain: The Wild and Raucous Story of Johnny Winter By Mary Lou Sullivan Foreword by Johnny Winter © Marc Wickert www.knucklepit.com
I love this book. It has everything. All the things that I wanted people to know, from how hard it was growing up in Texas being an albino, my career, the early days, my problems with drugs...it's excellent and realistic and exactly what happened. - Johnny Winter's endorsement of Raisin' Cain. Johnny Winter (1944 - 2014) goes on to say "There never was a point where I didn't want to play blues... Blues goes in and out of style, but it'll always be around because it's just too good to go away. Not all bluesmen took the fickle public's whimsical taste in music so stoically. Former Canned Heat frontman, James Thornbury, told Knucklepit: "I seem to remember Fito de la Parra saying that when the disco times hit, which was really tough on the blues bands and certainly hard on Bob Hite I seem to remember Fito saying that the biker gangs really hung in there with Canned Heat. Of course, they wouldn't have been into disco. So that is one way that they (Canned Heat and the bikies) were linked. And they always stayed that way I guess. Raisin' Cain takes you back through Johnny's childhood, as many other biographies do, but Mary Lou Sullivan doesn't do it to fill in pages and bore you to death, as many biographies do, but gives you an incredibly interesting insight into what made Johnny Winter the brilliant bluesman he was. And it wasn't by luck he became that legend. "I'd practice six to eight hours a day in my room after

school. From the time I got home I was with whatever my newest record was. I played so many different styles that they became my style. At first I'd try to learn how the artist played, and then I'd switch it around and play it my own way.

• Author Mary Lou Sullivan introduces you to many of Johnny's influences: Muddy Waters (Muddy Waters's album was the first time Johnny heard a slide guitar; the sound perplexed and fascinated him at the same time), Clarence Garlow, Little Walter, lightning Hopkins, Blind Willie Johnson... Being born albino was never easy for Johnny or his brother Edgar, and early in Raisin' Cain Johnny says philosophically "Everybody has some kind of a problem even if it's not something you can see. This is just one of the little problems life gives you to see how you're gonna handle it."

• But later in the book Mary Lou Sullivan quotes from a Rock magazine reporter where Johnny isn't as stoic about the hand one is dealt. "I'd been born a reject and suddenly I was worshipped as a god. If I wasn't worshipped, I was hated by jealous people. Both attitudes pissed me off. Either way, I felt left out, lonesome."

• Johnny Winter was a powerful influence on many other musicians including Stevie Ray Vaughan and the Rolling Stones, Brian Jones, who Bill Wyman described as being "the first person in England to play bottleneck guitar when nobody knew what it was."

• Brian Jones loved Johnny's slide playing and adored Winter's "I'm Yours, I'm Hers," a song The Stones opened with as a tribute to Brian at their free Hyde Park concert in 1969. It was also a song that may have influenced the composing of Monkey Man.

• Raisin' Cain seems to cover anything a Johnny Winter fan would want to know about this extraordinary man from Johnny's collection of Gibson Firebirds, National resonators, Fender Precision Bass, Les Paul Customs, Thunderbird Bass and Lazer guitars, his relationship with Janis Joplin, the unscrupulously cruel rip-off managers and recording companies, to the people such as members of his most recent band who loved him and turned his career around. You also encounter the musicians Johnny Winter loved to jam with: Jimi Hendrix, Dr John, Willie Dixon, Allman Brothers...

• "I liked him (Duane Allman) a lot for his slide playing and all of it, I liked Dickey's style too. That day, I jammed with Duane and Dickey Betts on Mountain Jam. I never felt like it was a contest with Duane. Our styles

went together pretty well and we took turns doing the leads. There wasn't any rivalry it was just fun. The thing I really like about Mary Lou Sullivan's Raisin' Cain is the way she captures Johnny Winter's personality throughout the book and reveals a lot of his many idiosyncrasies: "Nocturnal by nature, Johnny still has what one of his sidemen called a vampire schedule, staying up all night, going to bed at 6 or 7AM, and sleeping late into the afternoon. Perhaps that was inspiration for brother Edgar's album They Only Come Out at Night. And "A private person, Johnny kept to himself on the road, but occasionally he'd meet (Randy) Hobbs and (Floyd) Radford at a restaurant for dinner. Raisin' Cain by Mary Lou Sullivan is an outstanding publication for all blues enthusiasts. It's not surprising Johnny Winter loved the book so much.

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