

Insight into the real Edgar Winter—cool perception

Edgar Winter romps out on-stage, lank white hair bobbing around his lean, ascetic features. Shouting "Get it on for rock 'n roll!" at the head of his four-man group, he bounds into the air as his strong fingers span the keyboard of an electronic synthesizer suspended from his neck by a leather yoke. At times he honks on a saxophone, takes a stick to the drums. He even sings into what looks to be an electrified length of shower tubing, as thousands of the blue-jeaned multitude at the Felt Forum in New York's Madison Square Garden leap from their seats in a dance of joy.

Edgar views his listeners with cool perception. "They don't come to listen," he says wryly. "They're not after a music experience. They want to be overpowered by loud, heavy sounds. Lots of bands don't play good music but the kids go crazy over them. If you don't jump around and put on a flashy show, the younger ones get bored. I don't know what they feel, but now I've found out how to do it!"

Until recently Edgar led an eight-man hard rock group called White Trash with whom he recorded "White Trash" and "Roadwork" for Epic. No more. "We had run out of rope," he explains. "They were happy getting it off on the same rhythm-and-blues based music we played ten years ago. I had known most of the guys since high school, when we first began together in Beaumont, Texas, but there's no sense trying to remain in the past. The horn players wanted us to be a horn group like Blood, Sweat, Tears or Chicago. They didn't respect the guitar players, who play so loud you can't hear what you're doing and jump around with the flashy stuff kids like to see most."

"When I build a real following, I'll be able to play more I

personally would like, even though audience reaction will not be as positive. And I'll do more complex things in the recording studio. I love big bands, writing arrangements, hearing them come to life as I imagined. White Trash produced better music than my new group. But on the road with a big band you don't have time to rehearse or improve. It's easier to play freer, younger-feeling music with a small outfit. And kids don't like too many people to focus on. They want to pick out three or four guys they can relate to personally and see exactly what they do." Edgar's first album featuring his group is "They Only Come Out at Night."

"Music has been my whole life," Edgar says, his voice low. "I've always felt that I had some real contribution to make. But if you're not exposed to good music at an early age, you won't know much about it; whatever you grow up with is what you're going to like. Before I can convert audiences to my point of view, I have to start saying something they agree with, get them interested."

"Most high-level creativity goes on inside a person when he's left to himself," he explains. "When I spent my time playing in little clubs, writing my own kind of music, I didn't have any friends. I lived in a world where jazz people, like classical people, practiced all the time. After work I'd stay up all night writing. Daytime makes me think about specific things—at night my thoughts just wander and that's when I come up with songs. But I became dissatisfied. I was shut off from people and there wasn't much excitement in my life. When the chance came for an Epic recording contract a few years ago, it seemed like destiny." "Entrance" was his first album. Edgar was familiar with the recording industry through his

older brother, rock guitar star Johnny Winter, who had preceded him to New York and a contract with Columbia Records. Once there, Edgar says, "I became aware that people who make records are forced to function on a different level. The 'regular'-world wavelength I'm on now isn't as good for me creatively. I don't have time to be obsessed with music anymore. You have to play a certain number of places to make a certain amount of money. You must put out albums six to eight months apart or people will forget who you are. But writing commercial songs isn't easy," Edgar observes. "It simply takes a different skill."

"When I was seven and Johnny was ten, we used to play the ukulele together and sing like the Everly Brothers. My father—he's a building contractor now—still sings in the church choir. He used to have a barbershop quartet, play the alto sax and banjo too. My mother plays classical piano but they were never serious musicians." The most important thing about music for Edgar was that it helped him "fit in." Both he and Johnny are albinos. "No one else in the family is that way," he says. "It's a recessive genetic characteristic. The odds against having two albino brothers is a million to one."

Offstage, Edgar's eyes are averted from the light. Occasionally they flicker from side to side, the way a snake's tongue flickers in and out. "That's called nystagmus," he explains. "The eye doesn't develop normally because of the lack of pigment. I get headaches. I can't see well enough to sight-read and I never read books because it takes too long. I like TV. I watch more movies than I should. At school I couldn't play sports, but I don't consider my vision a handicap because it led me

into music. I wanted to excel at something, establish an identity for myself. But where my music became complex and drew me inward, Johnny, who was outgoing, played more to gain popularity."

"Johnny influenced me heavily. But his dream was always to be a popular star, whereas I never had the slightest interest in that. I always thought of myself behind the scenes, working in his band, doing arrangements, helping with organizational things. I wanted to influence the heavy music people, not audiences who listen to the top forty records on radio. Although Johnny saw me as part of himself, an alter ego, I'm almost the opposite of him. I've been more analytical and intellectual, interested in the principles of science while he was into worldly things. Even our music was completely different, although we played together in bands. There's a real communication; we know all of each other's stuff and each was around when the other was learning, but Johnny has a huge ego. With his trio—guitar with bass and drums—it's all his music, the way he wants it. I want an interplay between people where everybody has a chance to play on as equal a level as possible so they can learn from each other and grow. But most leaders are like him. I'm not typical."

Edgar took piano lessons for three years—he'd listen to his teacher play and memorize anything that struck his fancy. "I liked classical," he recalls, "but not the discipline. Going over and over the same pieces was too regimented, almost like school. Jazz seemed to be on a higher level." He grew to hate school.

"Homework took me at least three times as long because of my handicap and it didn't seem fair to be given the same amount as the others. I was smart, but teachers resented my attitude because all I wanted to do was learn at school during the day and play music at night. I began working little clubs when I was eleven—we lived on the Gulf coast in Texas, twenty miles from Louisiana, where all the kids used to go to dance and drink because the age limit was only eighteen there."

"Finally I decided that I couldn't

keep up. I had to find someone, my mother or others, to read my assignments to me, and even though I was really into higher math and chemistry. I dropped out of high school in my senior year. I thought the experience of being on the road would be more beneficial."

Edgar adds in a matter-of-fact tone, "The road does strange things to you. Everything just blurs together. You don't feel you're getting anywhere, playing the same things all the time. You have no personal life. Everybody relates to you as a rock 'n roll personality and you just can't talk to anybody as if you weren't in rock. You feel you have no home, no roots, and after a while, if you lose perspective, you just go crazy. I try to stay healthy and get enough sleep. Habits take up too much of your energy—I quit cigarettes, which I'd begun smoking when I was eleven. Johnny flipped out for a while from a combination of too much road work and drugs. Drugs only hurt you and bring down your creativity."

"The thing that helped insulate me in music was not using my eyes very much, not looking at people when I talk to them. If you don't study expressions, you don't have to react to everything that's going on. But it was bad too, because it made me more dependent on people to get around. I used my poor vision as an excuse not to do anything, to isolate myself from everyone outside of music. Now I feel a lot more balanced than I used to be. But," Edgar believes, "greatness comes from distorted drives and obsessive motivations. I didn't want to think about it at the time. Everybody wants to think he's special. I just thought that any trouble I had adjusting socially was because I was a special person. I resented specific things that happened to me but I wouldn't let myself get bitter. I felt I had compensations that made it all worthwhile. It's been hard, but it's been good for me. I understand it all a lot better now and find it easier to accept what I really am." Edgar says quietly, "It's stupid to think, oh, if I could only go back and do things over again. I'm sure I'd make the same decisions. I wouldn't change anything about my life."

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