

Johnny Winter attracts a redneck audience to the Phoenix

by Dominic Ali

"Goddamn," I thought, "where the hell did all these rednecks come from?"

Picture the scene: a packed house at a sold-out show in the Phoenix Theatre; about 700 "forty-some-things," good ol' boys who seemed to share a penchant for facial hair, beer paunches, cowboy boots and Stetsons; and two of the best blues/rock bands to hail from Texas.

No doubt about it. This was definitely the Omar and the Howlers/Johnny Winter double bill.

"I been goin' to see Johnny since you two were probably in diapers," one good ol' boy related to my friend Mike and I. That started me thinking

CONCERT

Johnny Winter
The Phoenix Concert Theatre
Thursday, March 5

about the close relationship between Johnny Winter and his fans. These were heavy duty Winterheads, lifelong followers of the albino Texan. Practically family.

Omar and the Howlers started things off with some Tequila-drenched, down 'n' dirty, Texas blues boogie that had the crowd bobbing their heads in approval. The Howlers had a tight groove, and were a perfect back-up for the Big O.

"He grins just like the Cheshire cat," quipped Mike. And after about

five minutes, so did I.

Omar's Strat screamed in ecstasy — I've never seen anyone play a low "E" like he did. Omar doesn't just pluck an "E" string on his guitar; he stretches, twists, squeezes and cajoles sounds out of it.

The venue was perfect for the Howlers, who were in control at all times. The band definitely warmed up the crowd, like a shot of much-needed bourbon on a cold winter day.

Then it was Johnny's turn. And by God did he ever tear into his axe. With a badass bassist and killer drums behind him, Winter played like there was a hellhound on his trail.

Johnny's brothers and sisters screamed so loud it was impossible to understand any between-song banter.

But it made no difference. We were there for music, and the trio delivered. They moved from the most mellow songs to the rauciest blues-rock tunes with grace.

And the fingers flew. Johnny whipped some licks out of his guitar that would have made lesser guitarists cower.

Johnny Winter only played for about 90 minutes. The crowd wanted

more — the shortness of the set was a bit of a letdown.

On my way out, a good ol' boy I'd talked to earlier slapped me on the back and told me to take care o' myself. I was surprised when I stepped out of the hall onto the street; in my heart, it felt like a Friday night in a rowdy Texas juke-joint, not a Thursday evening in Toronto.

It took seven years to see best band ever

by Kathryn Bailey

"An earwig crawled into my ear, made a meal of the wax and hairs, phoned friends, had an insect party, but all I could hear was the bass drum..."

This was my first experience of Tim Booth's riveting lyrics back in 1986, when James' debut album, *Stutter*, was released. Six years and six albums later, James are heading for international stardom. One wonders why it took so long.

Over their nine or ten years of existence, James have experienced a multitude of setbacks. Hopping between various record labels, major hassles with record company executives and constant line-up changes have all slowed the band down.

But with this in the past, original members Booth, Jim Glennie and Larry Gott can rest easy. Their recent

CONCERT

James
The Opera House
March 8

show at The Opera House proves that they have what it takes.

With what Booth called "a seven piece orchestra," James overwhelmed the sold-out crowd in their first Toronto show. James was supposed to be part of the first Toronto Smiths show in 1985, but — for reasons unknown — cancelled. Since then, they have polished their act, developing a mature sound.

There were no extravagant stage antics, if you discount the appearance of trumpeter/tambourine man Andy Diagram in a dress or Booth's convulsive dancing.

The band successfully played

classics like "Sit Down" (which the crowd actually did), "Come Home" and a frighteningly intense version of "Stutter." They combined these with songs from their soon-to-be-released album, *Seven*.

Booth is a loveable enigma, following in the footsteps of Morrissey. At one point, some bright person threw quarters at Booth, who responded, "Throwing things is usually considered a hostile action." When an audience member screamed an offer to kill the person, he added, "No need. We're all vegetarians — we don't eat meat."

Morrissey himself has called James the best live band ever. I would go beyond this and say that James are the best band ever.

It's a shame we had to wait seven years to see them.



Being at a Johnny Winter concert is not for the faint of heart. "Goddamn," *Excalibur* reviewer Dominic Ali thought, "where did all the rednecks come from?" The Phoenix Concert Theatre was a rowdy juke-joint when Winter came to town.

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19
Excalibur march 18, 1992