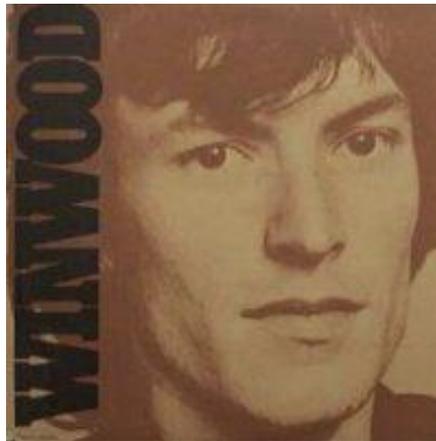


Experiencing Winwood: A Musical Memoir in 11 Minutes and 41 Seconds

by Phil Rice

originally published in The Juke Jar, 2004

The presents under the tree in 1974 have all faded from my memory, joining the other lost images from the receding past—except for one. There was a flat, 12” x 12” package from my brother, one of many such shaped presents I would receive from him over the years. As I ripped off the paper I was confronted by a huge face with angular cheekbones dominating the brown cover of a double record album. There was only one word on the front, in big letters lined up vertically on the spine edge: WINWOOD.



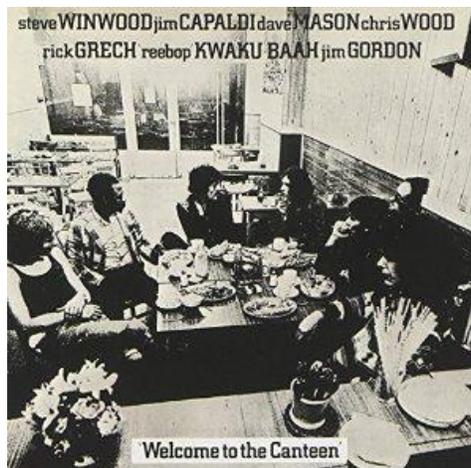
At first I didn't know what to make of the album, which I soon figured out was a collection of different songs from different groups, all featuring a guy named Steve (sometimes Stevie) Winwood. The ones to pay particular attention to, according to my brother, were “Goodbye Stevie,” which featured Winwood on piano, and “Stevie’s Blues,” which showed his prowess on organ and guitar. With that bit of advice my brother returned to his hideaway in the basement and left me to decipher the music for myself. I was 14 and still listening to my Beatle and Creedence Clearwater Revival records over and over again, and feeling no need to branch out. But now there was a new window open, and I was being drawn closer to the sill.

My electronic listening options in those days were limited to my own tiny record player or the family “hi-fi,” a rectangular wooden box encasing a stereophonic amplifier, a turntable, and two speakers. When the living room was empty, I would plug my headphones into the hi-fi, lie down on the floor, close my eyes, and focus intently on the sounds bouncing out of the tiny speakers. I did this a few times with the Winwood album and discovered that the songs on the first record were catchy and the sort that my 14-year-old mind could easily grasp. The second record contained songs that I wasn't quite

ready for, despite the vague familiarity of some of the cuts, such as “Sea of Joy” and “Medicated Goo,” which I had no doubt heard during the years I shared a bedroom with my brother. All in all, the collection was difficult for me to digest, and I was slow to reach for the *Winwood* album during these listening times. But I was already convinced that it contained something special.

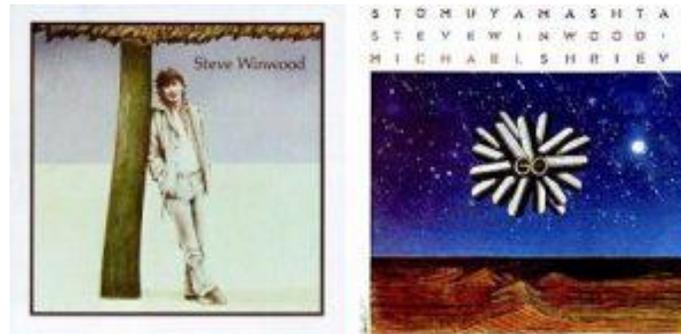
The next year I made the trek from Nashville to Sewanee Academy, a boarding school located on Monteagle Mountain about 90 miles away from my home. Stuffed in my trunk of personal belongings were my fifteen or so albums, but I didn’t have my own stereo and was therefore at the mercy of friends to allow me the use of their sound machines. I found that most of my records were suspect in the eyes of my peers and that my tastes were apparently out of step with the current popular tunes. Heavy Metal and Southern Rock (which held little interest for me despite, or maybe because of, my Southern roots) were enjoying great popularity among my friends, while songs by Elton John and Peter Frampton and the like dominated the top-40 stations. Somewhere far from Tennessee the artless sounds of disco were permeating the clubs and dancehalls, poised to infiltrate the music scene. *Winwood* was not on the playlists, so the album stayed tucked in a drawer despite my yearnings to further explore the music.

After a year at Sewanee I had managed to get in enough trouble that my parents decided to save their money and take their chances with the public schools. I bought my first stereo that summer, and that first record of the *Winwood* double album finally found a permanent home. Through the Spencer Davis Group I began to discover the “blues,” completely blind to the irony of having a white teenager from Birmingham, England introduce me to a music form that had been scratched out a few decades earlier by black folks living in the Mississippi Delta—about three hours down the highway from me. Then one day my best friend’s mom told him to get rid of all of his “hippie” music, so he pretended to toss the items in the trash but instead gave the whole batch to me. Included in the grab-bag was an eight-track tape called *Welcome to the Canteen*, which featured Steve Winwood and a bunch of other names I didn’t recognize. I listened to that tape with appreciation until it ultimately met the fate of all 8-tracks—snapping and disappearing into the bowels of the stereo.



For several weeks I found that whatever I was doing or wherever I was going—walking to school, riding my bicycle, etc.—I had this incessant little groove going through my head. It was the bass-line from a song called “40,000 Headmen” on *Welcome to the Canteen*. The lyric was something about running from a . . . smoking a cigarette and dodging . . . hell, I didn’t know what, but it sounded cool, and I could relate to the words even if I didn’t completely follow the plot. But mainly I could feel that groove. I discovered that the music itself could take me on a journey regardless of the lyrics. Soon I could separate and rejoin the sounds of each instrument in my head, and Winwood’s vocal was functioning as another instrument within the groove itself. From that point on I would experience music on a holistic level beyond the lure of words or lyrical hooks.

As a senior in high school I had a job as a stock boy for Cain-Sloan’s, a department store that catered to Nashville’s social elite. One afternoon as I was merrily buzzing my way through a work day I overheard a song that featured a familiar voice. I went directly to the record department and discovered that, indeed, Steve Winwood had released a new album—his first as a solo artist. I bought the album immediately, and it became a fixture on my turntable for many months. Oddly, I was the only person I know who bought that album in its first run, although now it seems to have achieved “lost masterpiece” status.



That same year I spotted an album called *Go* in a record shop window. The name “Winwood” was displayed on the cover, so I bought it. The music, composed mostly by Japanese artist Stomu Yamashita, was wonderfully bizarre to my ears, full of keyboards and a wide assortment of percussive sounds. The album was the musical story of a journey through space—I think—and as far as I am concerned it surpasses any of the Pink Floyd “tripping” music of the seventies. The ensemble, besides Winwood, included drummer Michael Shrieve, jazz guitarist Al DiMeola, and bassist Rosko Gee, among others. Again, I was mesmerized by music that remained unheard of by my schoolmates. I was set apart in my own little world, and the music Steve Winwood was introducing into my life made that little world seem open to infinite possibilities.

II



No album characterized my freshman year at Maryville College in 1978 better than Traffic's *The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys*, which I had discovered seven years after its initial release. I played the album over and over, particularly the first side, until I could hear each thump and tap, and I was amazed that every space was filled—everything seemed so rhythmic and perfectly balanced and yet somehow spontaneous. I also began to feel the spiritual qualities of the music instead of clinging to the rhythmic and lyrical surface. No longer was the art form of music just about songs. As I read the literature and history lessons placed before me in the classroom, the flowing Traffic music living in my head described how I wanted my budding intellectualism to develop. The Beatles and other pop artists still covered my romantic desires just fine, but the real and ethereal worlds were squarely in the hands of Steve Winwood, Jim Capaldi, Chris Wood, and their assorted musical companions.

Winwood, by this time, was actually a rock 'n' roll legend of sorts, a fact that went largely unrecognized by my college peers. Then, usually after a summer break or a long weekend at home, some Winwood-convert would come bursting into my room proudly waving a new discovery from the record store bins. In this way I was introduced to Traffic's *On The Road*, a magnificent album recorded live in 1973. Unlike *Welcome To The Canteen*, this concert album was jazzier and more fluid with Chris Wood's sax and flute up front more often. In addition to such musical sophistication, every song was an extended jam with marvelous percussion and a greater than usual dose of stinging electric guitar from Winwood in addition to the splendid keyboard work. The recording was from the tour in support of the album *Shoot Out At The Fantasy Factory* and featured the Muscle Shoals rhythm section of David Hood on bass and Richard Hawkins on drums. Many Traffic fans seem to rate this album as mediocre, but it was an important cog in my musical education and remains high on my list of favorites.



I began my sophomore year with a new purchase—the *Mr. Fantasy* album from 1967. This was Traffic’s debut album, and considerably different in tone and texture from the early ‘70s stuff I had been digesting regularly. I spent many hours spinning that album. Unlike most of the others, this one never seemed to catch on with my friends at all, but I loved *Mr. Fantasy*. Every track—except a couple of offerings from occasional member Dave Mason—played directly to what I was experiencing on the inside. The fact that Steve Winwood was approximately the same age when he recorded the album as I was when I was listening to it probably had some effect in this regard. I was convinced that it was as colorfully brilliant as any of the breakthrough albums of that psychedelic period.

III

And so I continued to bounce along in quiet appreciation of my musical hero and his assorted band mates, and gradually I picked up the complete Traffic catalog as well as other albums on which Winwood played. He had become a part of my own artistic development in a deeply personal way. As I studied the various fine arts disciplines presented in the classrooms of Maryville, I carried a growing awareness that the initial impression received from art was just an invitation to delve into the subtleties. A significant portion of this aesthetic maturation had been influenced and nurtured by hours of digesting the songs and performance of Steve Winwood. Already painfully introspective, many of my own writings began to demonstrate an abstract cohesion and an intentional lack of conclusiveness—I was writing Traffic-styled jams, although the occasional appearance of this voice in my academic papers resulted in chastisement from my professors.

With very few exceptions, the only people among my peers who knew about Winwood’s prowess had learned of such through their acquaintanceship with me. But then that all changed. “While You See A Chance” hit the airwaves in 1980, and my possessiveness was gone forever. Steve Winwood became a legitimate top-40 star. Although I was a little unsure what to think of the heavy use of synthesizers, I liked the new album, and I was quick to proudly point out that every instrument on the record was played by Mr. Winwood. The songs were good, if not quite up to the brilliance of Traffic, and I felt some sense of validation at his newfound universal recognition.

My life soon got busier and I found less and less time to devote to records and turntables, but I still managed to keep some of the music playing. My first year out of college was enhanced by the follow-up to *Arc of a Diver*, another entirely solo-performance called *Talking Back to the Night*. The album didn't do as well commercially, but I played it endlessly and let it bounce through my heart as well as my brain. I had married at twenty-one, and when *Talking Back to the Night* was released we were expecting a baby. I actually suggested to my wife that we name our child "Valerie"—the title of one of the catchier tunes. She quickly and adamantly rejected the suggestion, but the request fits neatly in my cache of Winwood lore.

The middle and latter part of the 1980s, with MTV and rap dominating the new music scene, held little in the way of musical satisfaction for me, but I was content with my albums at home and my homemade cassettes of those albums in the car. Winwood remained a top 40 star with several commercial successes, and "Higher Love" and "Roll With It" both went to #1 on the Billboard chart. He even won Grammys for Record of the Year and Best Male Vocal Performance in 1987. Many of his old fans were horrified and accused him of "selling out," but I didn't hold it against him. After all, he deserved his time in the pop spotlight, and the music he was making, while not the sharp-edged inventiveness of Traffic nor the soulful blues of the Spencer Davis Group, was still a damn sight better than most of the other tunes on the radio airwaves. I bought *Back in the High Life* and *Roll With It*, just as I would buy *Refugees of the Heart* in 1990 and *Junction 7* in 1997. Each album has solid moments, but when I was in the mood for Winwood music I still reached back to the earlier stuff. I went through several Winwood periods, dwelling particularly long in Traffic's *John Barleycorn Must Die* and Blind Faith's self-titled gem, the remarkable album he made with Eric Clapton, Ginger Baker, and Rick Grech in 1969.



Although not directly related to the music, the most impressive moment for the 80s Winwood was when he married Eugenia Crafton, with whom I had attended Sewanee Academy in 1975-76 and where, being both beautiful and utterly personable, she had been the object of considerable lust within my 15-year-old heart. One day she and a friend of hers were standing nearby and some sort of greeting was exchanged between us. The radiant Genia smiled and said to her friend, clearly meant for me to hear, "he's cute." I knew even then that the comment, while intended as a compliment, was said in the manner one discusses a puppy or perhaps a baby in a carriage, but it made my head soar nonetheless. ("Dear Mister Fantasy, play us a tune . . .") If only I had managed to utter a

suave reply, instead of blushing and stumbling away, my life might have taken a dramatic turn—Steve Winwood might today be stepfather to my children.

IV

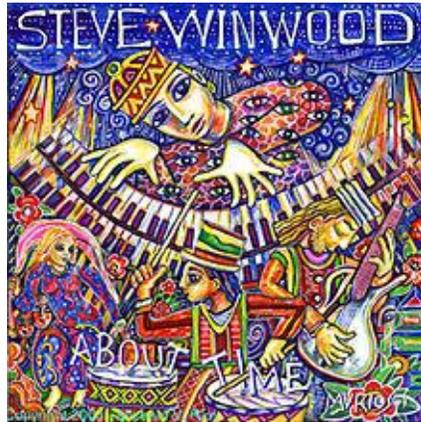
During the 1990s my musical tastes continued to expand into new realms and genres, but Winwood was always in there somewhere. One night I turned on the television to see him and Jim Capaldi playing at the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville. There was no audience except the camera. Most of the tunes were with Winwood on an acoustic piano while Capaldi thumped on congas or fiddled with some other percussion instrument. It was great little show, and it turned out to be a prelude to a new Traffic album and tour. Chris Wood had died in 1983, and the two surviving members of the Traffic nucleus, uneasy about using the Traffic name for something that didn't include their friend, chose to play all the music for the album themselves and dedicate the project to Wood. The music was great, and the spirituality of Winwood's *Refugees of the Heart*—a greatly under-appreciated album in my mind—was carried forward on Traffic's *Far From Home* beautifully.



As I approached 40 I felt that my perspective was actually catching up with Winwood's, and I realized that his career milestones had become artistic landmarks for my own life. At first the timeline is skewed since I discovered his music sometimes ten years after the original recording dates, but the music always fit perfectly as the soundtrack for whatever point in time I crawled inside a particular album. When he deviated from his own artistic path for a few years, I took the opportunity to more fully dig into his earlier work and in that process I developed a sense of his changing character as an artist as well as my own. And just as I was breaking through to the reality that dramatic changes are necessary in my life, Winwood steered into a spiritual vein that played perfectly in tune with my own events, thus providing a musical mirror into which I can either stare or glance beyond the fantasy self of rock 'n' roll and see the flesh-and-blood spiritual self.

EPILOGUE: The Concert

The passing days were too numerous to follow, and life events blurred together in one unsteady memory as middle-age hung on my mind like a forgotten ham in a long-abandoned barn. And then came *About Time*, Winwood's 2003 CD offering. Just a few seconds into the opening track, "Different Light," the Hammond organ jumped out and shook me to my rusty core. I picked up the phone and started calling people and letting them know that the most important album to be released in 30 years was now in the stores. I meant it, too, although I knew my raves would fall largely on disinterested ears.



My own exuberance was buoyed by the news that Steve Winwood would be appearing in concert at the Florida Theatre in Jacksonville, Wednesday, April 28, 2004, a wonderfully quaint venue that would be well-suited for the minimalist band with which he was touring.

My daughter Christi, who had been force-fed Winwood music since she was in the womb and was not named Valerie, attended the concert with me. Having grown into an independent-minded 19-year old, she possessed a keen intellect and an astute ear for music. My hope was that she would take from the evening at least some assurance that my love for this particular artist was not a mere adolescent rock 'n' roll obsession but an aesthetic appreciation of considerable depth and merit. That's a lot to ask of anyone, of course. Fortunately she does have some respect for my musical tastes (I think) and brought a willing and open mind along to the show. But beyond the musical experience, taking her to the concert was like introducing her to a relative or lifelong friend—she would have the opportunity to glimpse some of my own organic past in the form of the artistic energy which would be loosed during the evening.

The concert itself was as fine of a performance as I could have expected. The theatre was packed with aging rock 'n' rollers mumbling excitedly about their favorite song or how they've been a fan since Winwood was a baby. The songlist was a retrospective that included nuggets from Traffic, Blind Faith, and the Spencer Davis Group. I couldn't help providing a running commentary throughout, although I tried to keep my chatter to a

minimum. Winwood sat at the Hammond B3 for most of the evening, but he picked up his electric guitar for “Dear Mr. Fantasy.” The only musicians on stage for this number were Walfredo Reyes Jr. behind the drum kit and Randall Bramblett, who set his flute and sax aside to take the seat behind the organ, just as Chris Wood would have done in concerts past.

As they moved into the groove at the beginning of the song, with Winwood standing out front singing into the mike, the sea of bald heads with grey ponytails around us nodded in silent approval. When Winwood stepped into the solo, he turned to face the drummer, and all three instruments locked together in a building frenzy until the guitar leapt beyond the song and soared around the auditorium, through the ceiling, and out into the starlit sky before gently returning to the stage in a perfectly timed instant as the band slid back into the melody. After about fifteen seconds, the gasping middle-aged thumpers found their breath and a rousing standing ovation drowned out the final minute of the song. Then Winwood set the guitar down and casually ambled back to the organ, a modest smile on his face.

My veins were buzzing for weeks. I kept calling Christi and saying, “Wasn’t it great? Wasn’t it great?” She acknowledged that it was a good show and that Mr. Winwood is a remarkable musician and indeed a special artist, but she wasn’t ready to discount the idea that he is also an adolescent obsession permanently lodged in my slightly decayed brain—a fair enough assertion, I must concede. But I can imagine the day when she tells her children about the night when music welded the past and present together in a magnificent package that rhythmically shook the heavens, putting a smile on her daddy’s face and aptly demonstrating the limitations of his words.

