

Bio – Charlie Winston – Album “Running Still”

“The question to ask is ‘How am I unique? What can I do to be unique?’ Remember that preciousness is not always a virtue. Sometimes you have to be irreverent and let things go and have rough edges. Like Leonard Cohen said, ‘It’s the cracks in the wall that let the light come in.’”

That’s Charlie Winston, by way of explaining “The Great Conversation,” a song that follows that philosophy to the letter as a highlight on his new album, *Running Still*. The song is, in fact, a “conversation” with one of his musical heroes -- not Cohen, but Beethoven. As in Ludwig Van. In that chat, Winston explains to ol’ LVB what he’s done to his Moonlight Sonata, which can be found within the tune, though in shards.

“I wanted to crack that beautiful piece of music up,” he explains. “Having taken it to this happy, joyful place and needed to be deeper than that, have this place in the end where it got crazy and messed up. Don’t want people to get too comfortable, put on my album and feel they’re going to be nurtured and pampered. I want to lead them, not be led by them. I’m saying as artists our obligation, like Steve Jobs said: ‘I want to make things people *will* want, not what people *do* want.’ That’s why he was so visionary, so ahead.”

Leonard Cohen, Ludvig Van Beethoven, Steve Jobs. Nothing like setting the bar high. Not that Winston would ever think of comparing himself to those titans. But they’re fitting inspirations for an album that is a full-range moving experience, stimulating the head, heart and feet into action in equal measures. And it is, in fact, quite nurturing.

“My sole objective on the album was to be able to engage people’s feet first and slowly rise to the mind,” he says. “So by the time they get absorbed in the lyrics, they’re fully engaged but realize there’s something more going on.”

Opener “Hello Alone” makes for an inviting call, a shared solitude, if you will, that’s at the root of the art experience. But the next song, “Speak to Me,” makes it clear that no one should limit Winston in terms of expectations, the all-vocal beat-boxed tour de force showing one of his many facets, with more to come: the snappy “Happiness” offers soulful yearning, “She Went Quietly” is a searching piano ballad (inspired by a heart-wrenching tale of separation involving his great aunt and, to lesser though crucial extent, the movie *Million Dollar Baby*), “Until You’re Satisfied” is ‘80s-referencing pop-funk celebrating Winston’s Prince fandom, “Wild Ones” is charging blues-rock, “Rockin’ in the Suburbs” is all vibrant energy ... and that’s just part of the picture. Not a surprise given that Winston also, with natural ease, refers to such diverse inspirations as Nick Cave, Steve Reich and Jacques Brel (and T.S. Eliot, Wim Wenders and Ingmar Bergman, for that matter) in discussing the album, as well as the whole sound world represented by mentor Peter Gabriel.

Most prominently there’s a sense of joy and discovery throughout the album, self-discovery in particular. Following up the breakthrough of his 2009 album, *Hobo*, a No. 1 smash in France and a huge hit throughout Europe and Canada, *Running Still* finds Winston and his richly talented band, the Oxymorons, in collaboration with producer Tony Berg (Michael Penn, Aimee Mann, Bruce Hornsby, Ozomatli) to reach new emotional and sonic colors. This is the first album featuring the band -- drummer Medi, bassist Daniel Marsala and harmonica ace Benjamin “Ben Henry” Edwards along with Winston’s piano and guitar -- which came together organically after the making of *Hobo* as Winston shaped new visions both as a songwriter and performer. Other than a little keyboard additions from Patrick Warren and a touch of guitar from

Tiny B (Berg, under a Winston-bestowed alias), the whole colorfully diverse ball of wax comes from the skilled hands of the empathic ensemble.

“It’s near impossible for me to write in one style only,” he says. “And today in my generation of songwriting, there’s a bit of a lack for me. People have forgotten the power of song, since the technology swept through, and how it carries. Coming from parents who are songwriters, that’s my No. 1 thing, really.”

That latter reference would be to the ‘60s English folk duo Jeff and Julie. And arguably, *Running Still* -- Winston’s third, following *Hobo* and his 2006 debut *Make Way* -- is the album to which his whole life has been leading. Winston was raised by his parents in their small East Anglia hotel, which he describes as “*Fawlty Towers*, but with a family” -- with two bars and a ballroom, hosting a constant stream of musical, theatrical and comedy performers. He says he was the “cheerful” one of the four children, responding to his father’s coercion to entertain.

“He bribed me to learn how to juggle and ride unicycles and all that at eight years old!,” he says. “My brothers Tom and Jo had their own band, so I was watching them do their thing. At 10 years old both my sister and I got piano lessons and my musical world started to be developed.”

His teenaged dream was to be an actor, but music pulled at him, with a focus on writing - - precociously, as his first band, when he was 15, had a brass section for which he got into writing parts as a love for all sorts of jazz intensified, complementing what had been a pre-teen obsession with hip-hop, through which he learned to beat-box, as heard on “Speak to Me”, “Wild Ones” and “Hello Alone”.

“I like to keep that element that sounds personal and intimate. If something’s produced by the body, it’s immediately more intimate.”

At 16 he followed brother Tom to music studies in London amid a vast array of students, he being the youngest. The oldest? “An old Jamaican guy, 72, who was a terrible trumpeter!” he says. “For me it was like home, used to odd characters around the hotel. My complete goal at the time was to become the best jazz pianist in the world, which is a little high. But nonetheless, good to have that focus.”

Ambition, then, was not a deficit. The campus also sported a dance school and Winston made contacts there and wrote music for some programs. He also, not much later, wrote a “little trio piece” for the London Symphony and “realized my calling was in composition as opposed to improvisation. That became everything to me.”

Next came a three-year stint in Baxter, the band fronted by his brother Tom Baxter (Charlie, Tom and sister Vashti Anna all use their middle names as stage names), learning the ropes of the pop life. Approaching 21, though, he needed a break and traveled to India for a month alone, returning to London to concentrate on writing music for theater, but quickly sliding in to the dual role of performing music as well as composing for stage productions before his brother recruited him back, this time often giving Charlie the opening slots on his shows. It was while recording Baxter sessions at Real World Studios that Winston met Peter Gabriel and a bond formed. A publishing deal allowed Winston to record *Make Way*.

The somewhat vagabondish life he’d been leading inspired “Like a Hobo,” and though he decided not to include it on the debut, it became a regular part of shows and grabbed hold of fans’ imaginations.

“The song seemed to generate this persona for me in people’s minds,” he says. “People would say, ‘How’s your hobo life.’ I’m not really a hobo! It’s *like* a hobo, but it was about my core values. Thinking about things my parents told me that I keep close to my heart. Important

not to put material values at the top of my list. Having few possessions was important to me, as a means for keeping loved ones closer.”

At that time a girlfriend prodded him to get out of London, travel more. So he busked his way around Europe, getting gigs where he could, making friends along the way, ultimately landing in Paris, and everything came together: He fell in with drummer Medi (a singer-songwriter in his own right, with a Berg-produced album released in 2011) as well as a manager and label who took a very active role in building up his name. Even a month before his second album was released, he was startled to be recognized by two girls while waiting to get on a Eurostar train. When *Hobo* was released, it all took off.

After the whirlwind of travel and performing that followed, those around him suggested he take a break.

“But I’d heard of too many artists on their second album being stuck after a hit record, and I didn’t want to be in that position,” he says.

So he set to writing fresh material while continuing the promotion of *Hobo*, plus his travels and explorations. Coming into the start of the *Running Still* process, with a full 28 songs ready to go. That’s where Berg’s expertise came in.

“Sat with him in pre-production week and went through everything. Talked about each song and it was very clear on most of them. We both understood that we’re striving for greatness. ‘The Great Conversation’ is the one that hooked him in, a whole commentary on what I’m striving for. As an artist if there’s one thing I’m obliged to do, one thing I have a duty to do, it’s create good work and at the right moment, produce work people can get excited about. If I can’t bring forward an album or even a couple of songs people can get excited about, there’s no point in even a discussion of making another record. Then I’m just wasting people’s time -- which is embarrassing to me, and for everybody else.”