

Paul Winter at Home with His Music in Litchfield

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Paul Winter, founder and leader of the Paul Winter Consort, spends more time at his home in Litchfield these days to be with his wife and young daughter, but remains as active as ever in his musical pursuits.

His concerts still take him around the globe and he continues a 20-year tradition of celebrating the summer and winter solstices at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.



The composer-bandleader-saxophonist has lived in Litchfield since 1974 and has created an eclectic catalog of music spanning more than 40 years. His curiosity and respect for foreign cultures, and for the planet and its inhabitants, have provided him with an endless source of inspiration.

He recorded live albums in 2000, *Journey with the Sun*, and *Celtic Solstice* in 1999. *Brazilian Days* is his most recent studio album, recorded in 1997 with Brazilian guitar legend Oscar Castro-Neves.

The World Tree is a project Winter has been working on for the past three years. He describes it as an event, an album, a book and a PBS-TV special. It is based on a

participatory musical celebration and intended to give the audience a “deeper experience of its own expression and a reconnection to a larger family of life.”

In the program, the musicians are positioned upon 10 stages surrounding the audience in a large arena with a 22-foot aluminum spiral sound sculpture on center stage, which is hung with hundreds of bells, gongs and chimes, representing the diversity of life. An ensemble of African-American dancers ascends and descends the stages, and the musicians periodically play instruments that hang from the tree.



One of the first *World Tree* performances had eerily ironic timing. On September 9, 2001, an all-day celebration took place at the Shelburne Farm in Vermont, an environmental center on Lake Champlain with an immense barn for performances.

The final version of the *Earth Charter*, a document developed by Professor Steven Rockefeller of Middlebury College and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, was presented. It is, in essence, a *Magna Carta* for the Earth, signed by all nations regarding their commitment to peace, the environment and sustainable usage of resources.

“On the morning of the tenth, we had breakfast with a group of people who spoke and presented, and we said goodbye as they were leaving for New York,” Mr. Winter remembered. “On the next morning I was still there and we knew they were right there in the city. It turned out that they actually saw the second plane hit and the buildings go down. It was such a phenomenal shift from the sheer optimism that we all felt, to that.”

On April 27, the Paul Winter Consort will perform at the Warner Theatre in Torrington, in a benefit concert for the Litchfield County Association for Retarded Citizens. On June 21, he starts off the longest day of the year with his ninth annual *Summer Solstice Celebration*, beginning at dawn, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

The core of the current Consort includes keyboardist Paul Sullivan, bassist Eliot Wadopian and cellist Eugene Friesen. A group of percussionists play with the Consort including Barry Olsen, Chris Berry, who lives in Zimbabwe and plays the mbira, or thumb piano, and Valerie Dee Naranjo, a Native American who plays the Gyl (jee-lee), a marimba native to Ghana. She arranged the percussion for *The Lion King* on Broadway and is a regular member of the *Saturday Night Live* Band.

“What I loved most were dance bands,” Winter remembered of his childhood in Pennsylvania, where he started playing the saxophone at age nine. “I remembered how good everybody in that whole dance hall felt when that music was playing. I grew up kind of aspiring to that. I just loved to create situations where people felt that way.”

As for composing, there is no ritual. He often comes up with a seed idea and improvises on it via the soprano saxophone, piano or voice, then compiles a group of ideas on cassette tapes, of which he has multitudes lying about in his barn/studio.



“I listen to the cassettes for those rare gems where something really seems to have a magic to it,” he said. “There’s usually a story that I start with but it’s not always the one I end with. It’s a very slow process for me.”

Living Music is his record label, which is part of Earth Music Productions, LLC., though no one is signed to a long-term contract. Since the label was created in 1980 it has

released 30 albums and 10 of them have received Grammy awards or nominations. Artists who have recorded for the label include former consort members and local residents David Darling, Paul Halley and Rhonda Larson, as well as Oscar Castro-Neves and Pete Seeger.

“I’m not inclined to want to sign people and lock them up,” he said. “We’ll just decide to produce an album for someone and whatever we do together has to be from a mutual enthusiasm. It’s more a music production endeavor. It’s not a record company.”

Winter’s aversion to labels is noteworthy. Reluctant as he is to refer to Living Music as a record label, he is more reluctant to categorize his wide-ranging music. ‘Contemporary contrapuntal Connecticut country consort music’ is the label he offers those requiring one.

“Triumph,” from the Consort’s *Celtic Solstice* album in 1999 - also titled “Trio Busk” on other collections - represents a unique sound Winter has captured in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The more than 20 years of performing and recording there have had an undeniably positive effect on his work.

“Triumph” features uilleann (pronounced ILL-in) pipe virtuoso Davy Spillane, who gained a loyal following after his performances with the *Riverdance* tour in past years. He stepped right off the jet from his native Ireland and headed for the Cathedral for the recording, which was accomplished in the first take. The harmonizing and trading of solos between the two, backed by Paul Halley on pipe organ, combined with the ambiance of the immense cathedral, give the listener a recent example of Paul Winter at his best, in one of his favorite environments.

“When improvisations come together like that, those are milestone happenings,” Winter said. “It was the consciousness everybody was in at the time, the space. It’s not something you can always duplicate.”

Those familiar with the recordings of his saxophone are used to hearing the space he records in, whether they realize it or not. He likes to record in exotic surroundings utilizing the utmost of natural acoustics. Exploiting the sound involves allowing for distance between his saxophone and the microphone. How close does he stand to find the right distance?

“As far away as I can,” he replied. “My instrument sounds better at a distance if it can pick up soome ambiance. My favorite recording setup of all time was in the Grand Canyon. There’s a particular side canyon that we found in the mid-eighties. It’s a place we call Bach’s Canyon. It has phenomenal acoustics.”

The *Canyon Lullabye* album and the sax overdubs for *Brazilian Days* were recorded there. It's a cul-de-sac canyon with an 800-foot curved wall at the end that throws the sound back down a side canyon, more than a mile from the river, and has a seven-second reverberation time which, according to Winter, is the same delay achieved at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Icarus is the Paul Winter Consort's most widely-known song, and album, recorded in 1972 and produced by former Beatles producer George Martin. The Consort members rented a house in Marblehead, MA and set up a portable studio inside for the recording.



“One of the allurements for George to come over and spend three weeks with us was that he and his family could be right on the beach,” he said. “All of us spent the mornings at the beach then we would come in and work from two until midnight. It was a happy way to record. Here we got even more time to explore.”

“One of the great things with George is that he loved to experiment with studio techniques,” he continued. “He had developed a lot of amazing techniques with the Beatles and he just gave us our heads, a lot of great ideas. That was a wonderful experience. After that I realized that I never wanted to go back in a studio again.”

The meticulousness of the recording sessions in the 1960s and 70s, when he was recording for major labels, contributed to Winter's finding his barn in Litchfield and settling there.

"I was always very frustrated by the time box that I was put into [in recording sessions]," he said. "We would never really explore things in depth. My mentors, in producing my own albums, were people who had the luxury of going to great lengths."

He mentioned Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary, who produced the first Paul Winter Consort album in 1968. The Consort had played on "The House Song" from Peter, Paul and Mary's *Album 1700* in 1967 and toured with them before that.

"Being involved in their recording sessions was a revelation," Winter said. "Prior to them, with my jazz sextet, we recorded seven albums for Columbia in the early 60s and we used to do a whole album in one session, in three hours. No record company was going to give you the budget to spend much time, but Peter, Paul and Mary spent an entire session on one song. I thought that was astounding."

The Paul Winter Sextet, formed while he was a student at Northwestern University, won the 1961 Intercollegiate Jazz Festival in Washington D.C. Trumpet legend Dizzy Gillespie and record producer John Hammond were the judges and the main prize was a recording contract. Winter was planning to attend law school but when the recording opportunity presented itself, he and the other members put off school for a year to give music a try. It was then that they decided to approach the State Department with the idea of sending them on a goodwill tour of the world.

"I was very fascinated by the fact that jazz was so beloved in many other parts of the world, seemingly more than in our own country," he attests. "I think they were intrigued by the fact that we were not only the top college jazz group in the country, but that we were perfectly integrated with three blacks and three whites. It was just the beginning of the Kennedy administration and civil rights was a major issue."

They were sent on a tour through Central and South America in 1962, which culminated with an invitation from Jacqueline Kennedy to play at the White House. It turned out to be the first time a jazz group had ever played there, and the sextet made the front pages of newspapers around the country the next morning with headlines such as "Jackie Digs Jazz."

A tour of jazz clubs throughout the country followed and "That nearly did us in," he remembers. The experience had a profound impact that would last throughout his career.

“Our experience in jazz clubs was that you were just really kind of a liquor salesman; a whole other environment,” he laments. “The context that we played in during our six months in Latin America were concerts. People listened in concerts and that’s what I loved most.”

The sextet broke through on the college jazz series tour in the early 60s and one of the other acts that had broken through at that point was the Dave Brubeck Quartet. In 1963 Winter visited Brubeck at his home in Weston and thereafter decided to move to Connecticut.

“He gave me the model of a path in music that I’d never known,” he remembers of his breakthrough. “You could live in the country and travel around and play your concerts and come back. You didn’t need to live in the city. That was my key to escape New York.”

Having grown up in Altoona, PA, Winter is at home in the country. Though the strings attached to a career in the music industry have kept him connected to the big cities, he remains grounded in Litchfield at the time of this writing with his wife, Chez, and his daughter, Keetu.

“I am extremely fortunate to get to continue pursuing the dream of creating the music that I want,” he is happy to say. “And to do it within the context of these different adventures in different places in the world, and to come back here and reflect upon it.”