

Vienna Union Hall News

Jonathan Edwards

This summer the Vienna Union Hall is pleased to present the iconic singer songwriter Jonathan Edwards. He will be performing on **Friday, July 19 at 7:00PM.**

Now living in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, Edwards continues to tour both with his band and as a solo performer. Following is a partial excerpt of an article/interview by Donna Johnston:

“Edwards is one veteran performer who is neither grizzled nor nostalgic. These days Jonathan Edwards, a vital and relevant artist in today’s folk and Americana scenes, is much more likely to be found looking forward rather than back. Still, the journey that has brought him to towns and theaters all over the globe -- perhaps one near you tonight -- is well worth revisiting.

That journey began in Minnesota, where Jonathan spent the first six years of his life before his father’s government job brought the family to Virginia. It was there that young Jon first sang in public – a

few music lessons from the lady next door, he found that he was inclined to do his best learning on his own. Progressing from piano to guitar because, after all, it was the ’60s, “I started on a \$29 guitar and immediately started putting a band together, writing songs and learning all the contemporary folk songs of the time,” he recalls. “I just loved it, loved everything about it, loved being in front of people playing music.”

Jonathan made the expected move to college following his graduation from high school, studying painting and art in college in Ohio. But music, a force not to be denied, remained a constant companion. “I started getting electric about the time Dylan did, doing electric folk music. I joined bands by saying, ‘Can I be in your band?’ and they’d ask, ‘What do you play?’ and I’d say, ‘What do you need?’ I’m still that way. I still love to play different instruments. It helps me understand production techniques and performance capabilities.”

Jonathan left college in 1968 to pursue the dream. Selling the car his father had loaned him for school, he bought a van to accommodate his band and headed east to Boston and its happening folk music scene.

Jonathan and his fellow band mates quickly immersed themselves in that scene, playing over 100 grueling six forty-minute sets per night – all over New England. They played cover tunes as well as their own country blues originals. After a few years Jonathan grew weary of the grind, finding himself drawn more and more to the clean, simple sound of an acoustic guitar. “I just one night said, ‘Hey fellas, this isn’t sounding as good as it could, and I’d like us to sound more intimate.’ I liked the sound of bronze strings on rosewood better than steel strings on magnets, and so I walked out of that club in Vermont, rented myself a van and PA system, and started traveling around the colleges in New England by myself, without gigs, just setting up in the lobbies of dormitories on a Saturday. Pretty soon I started



solo in church at the age of eight – and began experimenting with songs played by ear on the family piano. On the brink of his teens, after only a

getting a following. People would say, 'Has that guy been to your dorm yet? That guy just sets up, plugs in and plays all night.'"

Jonathan's initiative and dedication soon paid off, and he found himself opening for national acts, including the Allman Brothers Band and B. B. King. This exposure attracted the attention of Capricorn Records, and he was placed under contract with them. "Recording was so new in '69 and '70. There was a song on the album called 'Please Find Me,' and for some reason the engineer rolled over it. It got erased. We spent hours looking for it. We fired the engineer and put 'Sunshine' in its place."

Like most of the songs on the album Jonathan Edwards (1971), "Sunshine" was written shortly after Jonathan left the band. "I felt really fresh, really liberated," he remembers. "I just went out in the woods every day with my bottle of wine and guitar, sat by a lake near Boston and wrote down all those tunes, day after day."

A fierce proclamation of protest "Sunshine" resonated with the thousands and thousands of frustrated and angry young men and women of the day. "It was just at the time of the Vietnam War and Nixon. That song meant a lot to a lot of people during that time – especially me," Jonathan says. It got its start on a Boston radio station and quickly made its way to the top five on the national charts, earning him a gold record in 1971.

"Sunshine" ushered in a sea change in Jonathan's life and career, sweeping him up in a current of "overnight" success. As Jonathan recalls decades later, "All of a sudden – '71 – I was a huge celeb for fifteen minutes and riding around in limos ... and I was trying my best, trying really hard to keep it at bay, to not take advantage of it, to not be that guy, to be the guy who I was going into that life-changing experience, because I liked myself and I thought what I was doing was right, and so I wanted to sustain who I was. For better or for worse, that was my decision."

Jonathan documented those days and those feelings in the song "That's What Our Life Is": "I don't let it change all the things I believe in." The song appeared on his second album, *Honky-Tonk Stardust Cowboy* (1972), "The songs I write are

about my life ... what's going on in my life, heart and spirit, and mind."

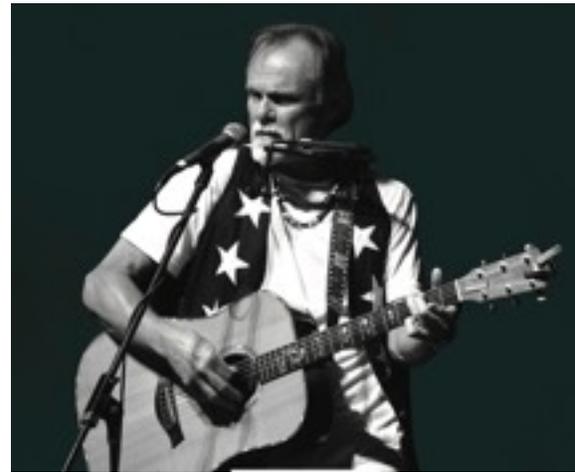
Following the success of "Sunshine," Jonathan sought a haven from the probing spotlights and noisy cities on a farm in western Massachusetts. In this bucolic setting, inspiration abounded, and the songs for *Honky-Tonk Stardust Cowboy* almost wrote themselves. Recorded for Atlantic Records, the album featured acoustic, country-inflected songs of love and life and was closely followed by a second Atlantic offering, *Have a Good Time for Me* (1973). This time around, Jonathan featured songs penned by friends who, in the early years of his career, had been instrumental in his development as an artist.

Today Jonathan says, "It's never been real important to me who wrote a song ... It's about the song, the flow of the lyrics, and how the lyrics are married to the chords and the melody and the rhythm.

What Jonathan did have a problem with in the three years following the success of "Sunshine" were the demands of the road. The seemingly endless grind of five and six one-nighters a week took its toll, and a life-threatening illness served to bring everything sharply into focus. While recovering, he decided to abandon his career and relocate to a farm he'd bought in Nova Scotia. "All I wanted to do was be on the farm. [The illness] straightened me out about my priorities regarding life, and I wanted to go back to the land. I wanted to learn how to grow a garden and raise animals, learn to work with horses, be in the woods and streams."

Jonathan still owed Atlantic nine more albums! In 1974 he saw the release of *Lucky Day*, an album recorded live at the Garage in Cambridge, Mass.

When old friend Emmylou Harris called and invited him to come to Los Angeles to provide backing vocals



for her Elite Hotel recording, he caught a flight and showed up the next day. "She called me out of the blue and said that she was doing a record in L.A. with her husband/producer Brian Ahern and wanted me to come down. She said that she heard my voice on a couple of songs."

His resulting relationship with Ahern led to a production deal with Warner Brothers and two critically acclaimed albums, *Rockin' Chair* (1976) and *Sailboat* (1977), featuring such legendary sidemen as Glen D. Hardin and James Burton.

Jonathan moved back to the U.S. in 1979, living briefly in New Hampshire before relocating to the Appalachian region of Virginia, close to his childhood home.

In 1985 he made *Blue Ridge*, an album that its legions of admirers claim sets the standard for excellence in bluegrass music.

A tender song inspired by the birth of Jonathan's daughter Grace in 1977 became the title track for his next project. *Little Hands: Songs for and About Children* (1987), a charming mix of American folk songs and whimsical original compositions, has been honored by the National Library Association as a "Notable Children's Recording" and remains a top seller in its field to this day.

In Nashville he recorded *The Natural Thing* (1989). "I was crazy about the songs we selected from those great Nashville writers," Jonathan recalls.

In the 90's he launched his own label, Rising Records. In 1994 he released *One Day Closer*, his first solo album in five years. He also participated in the "Back to the Future" tour, joining Don McLean, Tom Rush, Jesse Colin Young, Steve Forbert, and Al Stewart and earning rave reviews for his efforts.

Jonathan's other projects during the '90s included scoring the 1996 film *The Mouse*, starring John Savage; producing albums for protégé Cheryl Wheeler; and signing artists like Lisa McCormack and Simon Townshend to his new label. He also released *Man in the Moon* (1997), which featured several new Edwards originals.

In 1998 a bootleg CD featuring the two Warner Brothers albums he had done back in the '70s had become a huge underground hit in the Netherlands.

In 2000, Jonathan became host of "Cruising America's Waterways", a pair of 13-week documentary series produced for PBS. The Concert at Sackets Harbor, and a CD featuring music from the series were released in 2001.

He produced two CDs - *Live in Massachusetts* (2006) and *Rollin' Along: Live in Holland* (2008). In addition, 2008 saw the release of a 90-minute documentary of Jonathan's life and career entitled *That's What Our Life Is*.

Jonathan can also be seen as the reformist preacher Reverend Perly in the 2009 release *The Golden Boys*, featuring a Jonathan Edwards score.

These days Jonathan is likely to be found on the road. "I've been...doing what I do best, which is playing live in front of people. I've been concentrating on that and loving it," he says.

An artist who measures his success by his ability to attract and take good care of an audience for four decades, Jonathan maintains that it is the feedback he receives after his shows that keeps him going.

Don't miss the opportunity to join him for an evening in Vienna as he continues to make good on that promise he made all the way back in 1971: "Sunshine, come on back another day ... I promise you I'll still be singing."

Tickets are now on sale. \$25.00 locally or \$26.00 online. For information and tickets call 293-2674, email viennaunionhall@gmail.com. Online at the [Vienna Union Hall website](#) under "arts and events".

Thank-you to our sponsors; Alternatives in Design, Camp Laurel Inc., Winthrop Veterinary Hospital and Kennebec Savings Bank.

More Upcoming Events

July 25-27 - [Historical Society Plays](#)

August 2-3 - Vienna Players (Plays)

August 8 - [Village Harmony](#) (Thursday) 7:30 PM

August 16 - [The Sunday Project](#) 7:00 PM

August 24 - [Bearnstow Dancers](#) 7:30 PM

September 13 - [Gawler Family Band](#) 7:00 PM

October 12 - [Mark Mandeville & Raienne Richards](#) 7:00 PM

December 21 - Winter Revels 7:00 PM