

# JONATHAN EDWARDS

## BIOGRAPHY

Warm as summer sunshine, real as the truth, intimate as a long overdue visit between old friends ... such is a Jonathan Edwards concert. Four decades into a stellar career of uncompromising musical integrity, the man simply delivers, night after night – songs of passion, songs of insight, songs of humor, all rendered in that pure and powerful tenor which, like fine wine, has only grown sweeter with age.

This 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 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 few music lessons from the lady next door, he found that he was inclined to do his best learning on his own; in the decades to come, this would prove to be true not only with regard to music but also to life in general. Progressing from piano to guitar because, after all, it was the '60s, Jonathan began marching to the tunes in his own head rather than the ones dictated by his military



school upbringing. “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.”

Regardless of music's siren call, 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.”

Eventually the draw of the music proved stronger than establishment expectations, and 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 6/40 gigs per year – six forty-minute sets per night – all over New England. They played cover tunes as well as their own country blues originals; you might have seen them in those days performing as the Headstone Circus or the St. James Doorknob or the Finite Minds. They even recorded an album for Metromedia Records under the name Sugar Creek. (out of print)

Not surprisingly, 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 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. “We took about a year recording the first album – different times, different studios, different sounds, different techniques,” he recalls. “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 eponymously titled 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 and independence set to deceptively upbeat music, “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. It was looking bad out there. 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), and it was not the first (nor would it be the last) time he drew on his life experiences for a song. “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, as a gesture of thanks and appreciation, 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. It’s all about that, not so much who wrote it. That’s why, over the course of my recording career, I’ll bet pretty close to fifty percent of the songs on my records have been written by somebody else. And I’m okay with that. People have a problem with that, but I don’t.”

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.”



The only problem with this plan was that Jonathan still owed Atlantic nine more albums! He was persuaded to deliver one more recording before heading north, so 1974 saw the release of *Lucky Day*, an album recorded live at the Garage in

Cambridge, Massachusetts. The title track conveyed the sense of joy and liberation he felt about his upcoming move.



Nine months later, as had happened during his college days years earlier, Farmer Edwards was again discovering that his music was a demanding lover, one not to be ignored, subordinated, or abandoned. So 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.”



Jonathan's 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. As a result, Nova Scotia saw little of him in the late '70s. Today he advises young people aspiring to the life of a performing artist to balance personal life and career. Fondly reflecting on his time up north, he recalls the line from "Nova Scotia" that gives voice to the contentment found by striking that balance: "What a friend I am to myself again."

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. There he became a regular patron of the Birchmere during its Thursday night performances by the Americana/bluegrass group the Seldom Scene. "I'd go down and listen to them. Soon I started sitting in. It started sounding pretty good. So I said, 'Why don't we go into the studio and record some of this stuff?' They said, 'Man, we were going to ask you.' Within a week, we were in a studio, recording."

The result was 1985's *Blue Ridge*, an album that its legions of admirers claim sets the standard for excellence in bluegrass music with its haunting harmonies, superb musicianship, and inspired song choices. "I'm really happy with the way that album turned out," Jonathan says. "It was an amazing experience because we left the recordings the way they were the day that we recorded them. There was no fixing it the next day or the next week. That was a new experience for me in the studio and very refreshing. It led to a certain spontaneity and immediacy in the music. It was a lot of fun."

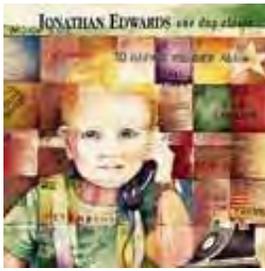


A tender song inspired by the birth of Jonathan's daughter Grace in 1977 became the title track for his next project. *Little Hands: Songs for and About Children* (1987), a charming mix of American folk songs and whimsical original compositions, has been honored by the National Library Association as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

A chance meeting in Nashville provided the spark for Jonathan's next career move. Following his immersion in the California country rock scene in the '70s and his bluegrass work with the Seldom Scene, it seemed inevitable – the natural thing, as it were – for Jonathan to record in Nashville. "I was touring with a Broadway show, *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, and we performed [the show] in Nashville. All of my old friends got together, including Wendy Waldman, who said that she knew a guy that 'had the ears of America. He has a studio and access to all of the best players.' I didn't write much, but I was able to glean a lot of cool songs from all of my old friends. It turned out to be one of my favorite albums."

That album was, of course, *The Natural Thing* (1989). "I was crazy about the songs we selected from those great Nashville writers," Jonathan recalls, "and the acoustic-based production that Wendy and I put together was just a joy to make and to listen to. I count that as one of the best albums I've ever been involved with."

Moving into his third decade on the national stage, Jonathan embraced the challenges of the



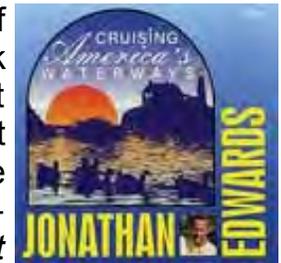
'90s by launching his own label, Rising Records. In 1994 he released *One Day Closer*, his first solo album in five years, and also participated in the "Back to the Future" tour, joining Don McLean, Tom Rush, Jesse Colin Young, Steve Forbert, and Al Stewart and earning rave reviews for his efforts.



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 Jonathan learned that 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. He contacted promoters there to see if there was any interest in having him come and do some shows, and the answer was a resounding "Yes!" Since then, he has traveled there regularly, much to the delight of enthusiastic audiences who know all the words to his songs, refuse to let him leave the stage, and buy every CD they can get their hands on.

The start of the new millennium found Jonathan doing a very different kind of traveling. As host of *Cruising America's Waterways*, a pair of 13-week documentary series produced for PBS, he traveled by boat (lots of different ones!) from the Thousand Islands in the northern St. Lawrence River to west of Key West. As host, he says, "I play[ed] music in and out of all of the scenes. At one point, we stopped along the river and did a concert." A 30-minute video of that concert, *Cruising America's Waterways: The Concert at Sackets Harbor*, and a CD featuring music from the series were released in 2001.



That year also marked the 30-year anniversary of the release of "Sunshine," which Jonathan celebrated with characteristic good humor in his First Annual Farewell Tour. As it turned out, the "First Annual" portion of that title proved to be much more prophetic than the "Farewell" part, resulting in the 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*. Released by Media Artists, the DVD is available for purchase at shows and here on this web site.

Jonathan can also be seen as the reformist preacher Reverend Perly in the 2009 release *The Golden Boys*, a film starring David Carradine, Bruce Dern, and Rip Torn and 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. "Sometimes, in our darker moments, we imagine our music not finding receptive ears, unable to reach open hearts. So it is really gratifying to hear [someone say],

‘Your stuff has meant a lot to me over the years.’”

On the verge of his fifth decade in the music business, Jonathan Edwards shows no sign of turning into a “Sit Down Rock and Roll Man.” Upcoming plans include new markets, new audiences, new songs, and a new studio recording. As this barefoot troubadour prepares for the next stage of his journey, you are more than welcome to join him for an evening or two 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.”

-- Donna Johnston  
July, 2009

