

North Star

Jesse Winchester
Calls Canada Home,
but His Music's
Strictly Southern

by Daisann McLane

Jesse Winchester's new house in Montreal—the first he's ever owned—is almost empty. Rolled-up carpets straddle bare floors, and a few rough-hewn wooden chairs suffice as living-room furnishings. The weather this morning is—like the title of Winchester's new Warner Brothers album—*A Touch on the Rainy Side*.

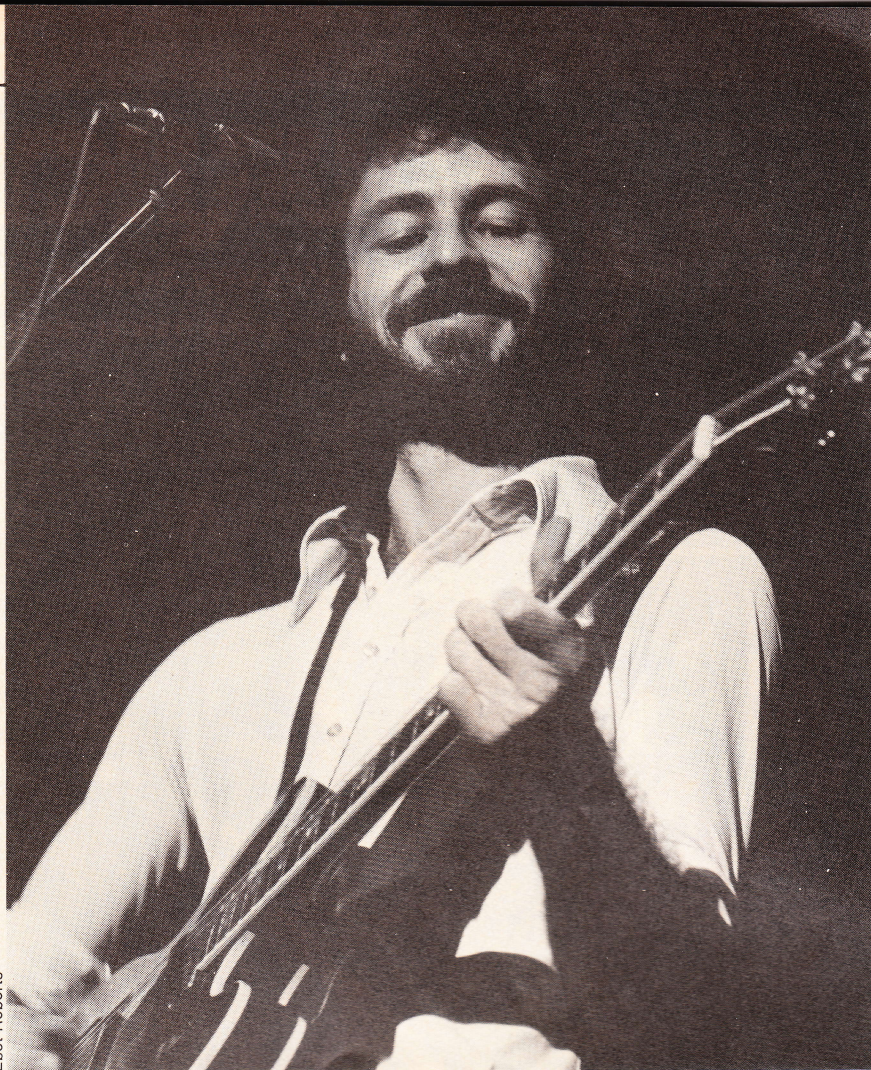
"I'm doing a lot of the work of restoring this place myself," the lean, earnest-looking singer-songwriter says. He points to the door frames; a careful craftsman's hand has stripped off the paint to reveal the intricately carved woodwork beneath.

That same craftsmanship and attention to detail are apparent throughout Jesse Winchester's latest album. *A Touch on the Rainy Side* combines Winchester's precise, evocative songs with country and R&B-tinged arrangements. "We recorded with Norbert Putnam in Nashville," Jesse explains over coffee in his new kitchen.

"Norbert's from Alabama originally, and we're coming from similar musical backgrounds. I think we think a lot alike...I hope he's not offended by my saying so." Winchester also gives Nashville studio musicians credit for the polished, comfortable sound of this album. "We worked with the younger guys there, the guys who are just cresting."

It was Jesse Winchester's first opportunity to make an album in Nashville, though his recording career spans eight years and six LPs. He grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, the son of a gentleman-farmer-turned attorney, and a descendent of one of that city's most prominent families.

At 23, he made a decision that changed the rest of his life. He fled to Canada because of moral opposition to the Vietnam War. Winchester did not expect to return, and he didn't, until President Carter's pardon made it possible for him to visit the U.S. He took



Memphis-reared Jesse Winchester's dark days as a draft exile may be over, but some changes are permanent: now, he says, "Canada is my home."

advantage of the amnesty to hit the road, and he toured the States for seven months, performing in cities he hadn't seen for 10 years. But it was only a visit. The 34-year-old singer makes one thing perfectly clear: "Canada is my home."

Though Winchester soon found he could make a living playing guitar in bar bands like "Les Astronauts", his problems were not over. Montreal, his adopted city, is over 80 per cent French.

"I could speak enough French to keep from getting beat up, but all my personality was gone...I couldn't communicate any wit or charm. It depressed me." Winchester's lack of linguistic facility did not keep him from charming his French wife, Leslie, who is bilingual. "I courted her in English, but with a little French thrown in—like 'Pass the potatoes'—just to prove I could do it. All the crucial things I said in English. I wanted to make sure I was understood." Jesse and his wife have been together six years and have two children.

Still, the experiences of exile and isolation took their toll. Some of Winchester's most moving songs—like his

single, "Yankee Lady," and "Mississippi, You're on My Mind"—are about homesickness; loneliness. Winchester used to devour books by the Existentialists. "Kafka and Camus...real cheerful sorts like that. I suppose I am a bit dour," he muses. He used to drink heavily, but stopped a few years ago: "I've had enough."

"I think Jesse is happier now than he's been in years," says manager Arnie Naiditch, and Naiditch should know; he was with Jesse all through last year's grueling U.S. tour. "Jesse never let up...he'd work 14 or 15 hours a day." And when Nashville's sheriff gave the former draft exile the key to the city jail, "Jesse thought it was funny. The plaque broke in three days."

Winchester is hoping that the new album does well. "There's a huge attic in this house. It'd be perfect for a studio. I'd like to record a lot of local Montreal bands...maybe get a house band together. We'd make some great singles, music that walked that line between country and blues. Just like Stax-Volt—in Memphis." He contemplates settling into his new home, and smiles. ●