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Jan. 8, 1971

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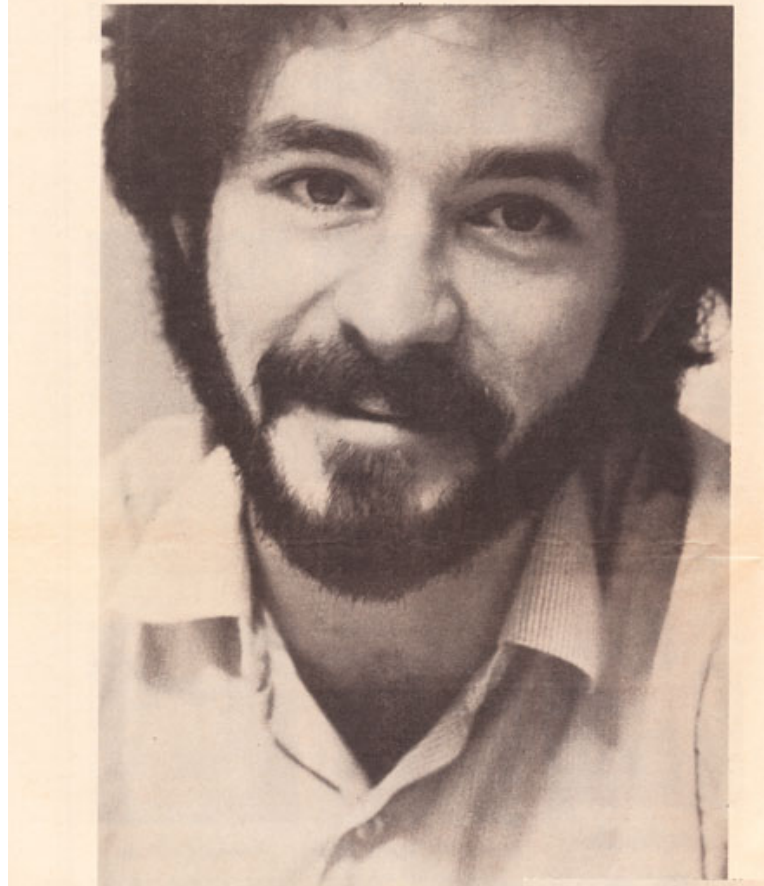
ZYOTO

Poco
Elton John
Jesse Winchester
Young Lords



January 8, 1971

Jesse Winchester



Jesse Winchester is an easygoing man. If you didn't know who he was you might call him lethargic, indifferent or even hostile. But once you've met and spoken you'd reclassify him shy, soft-spoken and not a little introverted. He draws out answers and comments in a voice that smacks of a perpetual head-cold, a tonal quality peculiarly redolent of the denizens of Tennessee. His habiliment is as noncommittal as his speech – dull-green corduroy jacket, straight unbelled or tapered trousers, ugly lace-up shoes. His hair is longer and curlier, his face a bit fuller than the picture on his first album where he looks like a Matthew Brady confederate or an Auschwitz inmate. Life in Canada has fattened up his drawn haggard look, but has it eased the “fear and trembling” and the “sickness to death” that besets the soul of this philosopher-rocker?

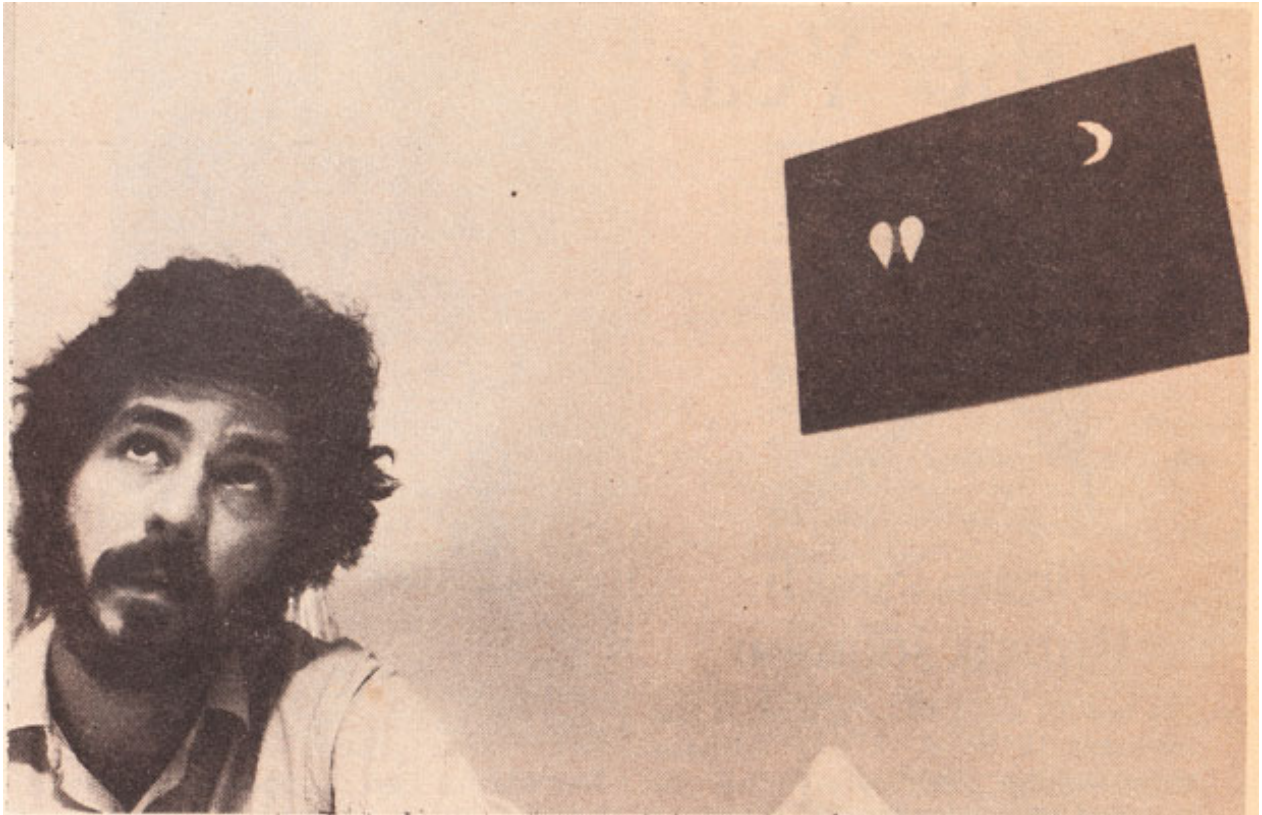
*Be of good cheer
It's all in His plan
He's walking with us
And He speaks through every man
But I have this notion
Call it my fear
That I will die alone
and even He won't be there
("Quiet About It")*

It's hard to believe that this man “used to dance about and do all the Mick Jagger things.” Not because he lacks the drive and energy necessary to dance and cavort satanically on stage, but because he appears too serious and mild-mannered. He would be embarrassed by the posturing necessary to the rock star who has a “dynamite” stage act. On the other hand, perhaps it takes the withdrawn personality of a Jesse Winchester to get up on a stage and emote straight out of the depths of a hard inner cluster of possessed mania that rarely comes animatedly to the surface. On those rare occasions when it does, there is a tenseness, a visible strain in the audience reacting to this raw rancid psychic brutality that is no performance but a reality more seminal than vitality itself.

*Have you seen the Black Dog's teeth as sharp as a knife,
Have you seen him tear upon a throat to take a life*

Once in a studio with a mike in front of him and the red light on, Jesse becomes a hard-driving man full of purpose. His straining frame twitches constantly. Punctuating the twitches almost like a chorus to a song, he jerks spasmodically, his upper lip lifts and he bares his teeth; a clinched grimace over-powers his entire countenance. It's not ethereally evil but underworldly mean. His voice is flat and uninteresting until he begins to sing, he doesn't get funky sounding until he gets

behind that mike. His sexuality begins to protrude then too, not the mock image-making homophile carnality of a Jim Morrison but a grasping, earthy lust.



How long were you in Louisiana?

Not very long, we moved right away. Moved until we finally settled in Mississippi and we stayed until I was twelve and then we moved to Memphis, well, right outside of Memphis. Left home and lived mainly in the North. Stayed a couple of years in Europe, in Munich.

Did you go to college?

I went a couple of years to Williams College in Massachusetts and a couple of years to the University of Munich.

You studied philosophy?

I studied languages. In Europe I studied philosophy, but I didn't learn anything. What I really learned was German. Because I didn't spend too much time at the school, 'cause in Germany, in fact all the European universities, you don't have to go to classes.

Were your lectures in German?

Yeh. Oh man, they got marble walls and professors with grey hair that really look like professor.

How long did you study German before you went to school?

I studied it for two years before I went over there, but you know how much good that does. You really start learning when you get out.

I was born in Shreveport twenty-six years ago

And I grew up kind of wild 'cause my daddy never told me 'no'

When did you start playing guitar and piano?

Piano I started when I was about six, guitar when I was about thirteen.

When did you learn classical piano or did you just pick it up?

I had lessons like, but you didn't really learn classical. I never got really good at that kind of thing, because I didn't enjoy it and they made you learn songs they wanted you to learn.

How long did you take lessons?

For about ten years.

So about the time you stopped that, you started guitar?

No, I started playing strings before that. I enjoyed that a lot better because I could play what I wanted to play. Then once I quit taking lessons on the piano I could do what I wanted – start playing rock and roll and I liked that a lot better.

Did you take guitar lessons?

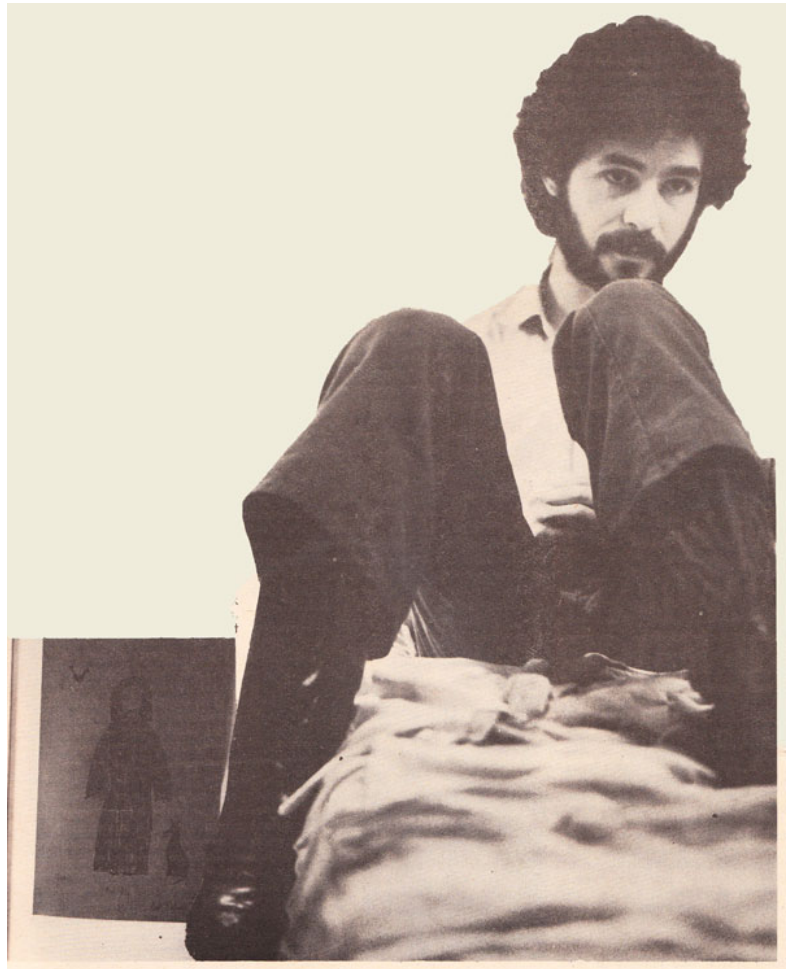
I took a couple of lessons, maybe two or three. It was the same story, the guy didn't want to teach me "What'd I Say." So I said to hell with you if you won't teach me "What'd I Say." But ... if I learned how to play "What'd I Say" I'd be working in a bar the next week.

When did you get together with other people, did you play in bands in high school?

Yeh. Right when I started out I started playing in a band and it was just raunchy as hell. 'Bout the same way as everyone does just startin' out slow and playing for high schools and stuff. Then workin' in clubs and the usual trip.

Did you play a lot of country and western?

I played a lot of country-western but not so much in the South. Played more country-western in the North than I ever played in the South. And in Europe I played a lot, they really just dug it. In the South, to be white in the South and playing country-western, like there was a big reaction among white people, white people my age, against like segregation and stuff. And therefore when I was a kid I didn't even want to hear about country-western. I dug some of it but I never told anyone. Mainly just listened to R&B. It wasn't until I got older that I could start appreciating other things.



Did you start out as a philosophy major at Williams?

No, just languages.

How many languages do you speak now?

Just French and German and jive.

Did you finish your degree at unich?

No.

Do you have a degree in philosophy?

No. I have a degree in German. It was a way to get out of going to the army really, going to school.

So what did you do in Germany?

Hung around for awhile and then came back to the states.

Were you playing in bands over there?

Yeh, that's mainly what I was doing rather than go to school.

*And then the devil spoke and I broke into a hardware store
A state cop recognized me in a New Orleans bordel
And he told me to come with him and I told him to go to hell
And I went and hit him in his head and he was dead before he fell*

Were they German?

Yeh, played R&B, country-western ... not so much blues, these guys just didn't have the feeling. We weren't saying that much musically, I'll say that. But we were working all the time, hard, and it kinda got us real tight.

Were you playing piano?

No, I was playing guitar.

A lot of vocals?

Yeh, did a lot of vocals.

Did you do a lot of solos?

Yeh. I was playing lead guitar ... that was fun.

How long did you stay over there before you came back?

A few months, then came back here. I finished school in the States, I finished school over here, at Williams. Then there was nothing to do except sit around and wait for the army to come. I went back down to Memphis for that time and played in a bar until around Christmas time and then they sent me a letter from the army. Just a note to show up for a physical. So in January I came up here. And it's been beautiful. It's been beautiful.

*Let's go out on the town tonight
My pockets are heavy with loot
And get drunk and nasty
And loud and aggressive to boot*





The Boiler room, a local college hang-out and Jesse's favorite bar, and the few other places in town where you might find a woman to love or at least one to lay up with for a night or two don't have much to offer. If you're an artist like Jesse and don't go to school or work from nine to five, there's not much to do with your spare time. Write songs and play music, drink a lot and smoke more, always hoping and looking for a woman or some idle sex, but the groupie scene hasn't hit Montreal yet. Toronto maybe, but that's worlds away. The French girls aren't much because they're into a different cultural scene; besides, they dress like middle-class Europeans with toned-down Bronx hair-do's. The English girls are pretty straight (about the only kind of bell-bottomed pants you can find in the whole province are blue-jeans) and goal oriented. American affluence hasn't overpowered the middle-classes yet. So there's not much of a "scene" to make in Montreal but drinking in the pubs and "watching the snow fall in the winter from your window and drinking tea."

Jesse doesn't talk much, but he's that modern anomaly – a thinking man. He could have been the prototypical model of "Mean Old Southern," yet he studied philosophy at the University of Munich. The demeanor of a Hollywood baddie, the personality of a Faulknerian ether rising from a backwater swamp coupled with the recessive balminess of Mr. Chips, the spirit of an incurable romantic visionary and the complacent ivory-tower intellectuality of a philosopher are phrases that describe Jesse Winchester, but still he's a rock'n'roll hero, a draft dodger and a sincere man seeking a wife and family.

*...love is mainly just memories
And everyone's got him a few
So, when I've gone, I'll be glad to love you*

What else could these be but the words of a man who believes deeply in love, however bittersweet or sardonic he expresses his disbelief. He's a creature of dark laconic fantasies with a hard cold edge surrounding and ultimately defining his personality, his being.



Did you come right to Montreal?
Right to Montreal.

Did you know anyone up here?
No, I didn't know anyone. So I came up and I knew there was McGill University here. So I went to McGill University, figuring at a university there would be some sympathetic people towards me, so I just went there and asked the first two guys I came across if they could direct me to somebody who could help me. So those are the first friends I made in Montreal and been making friends that easily ever since I got up here. It was really hard the first while, but in time it got a lot easier.

Do you have immigrant status and have you applied for citizenship?
Yeh, but have to wait a year and half for citizenship and that's assuming they give to me after I've waited.

What did you start doing for money when you got up here?

I got a job in a French band when I first got up here. They had a guy who sang sorta like Englebert Humperdink. In French. So I did that for a few months because the money was very regular. They didn't speak any English at all, so I learned French that way too, see. But I was very depressed then, because when you have to speak another language that you can't speak very well, you have to talk like an idiot all the time and you're spoken to like an idiot. It really brought me down after awhile. I couldn't take it anymore. But they were very nice, it was just that....

So you left that band?

Yeh, I couldn't take it anymore. Besides, the agent of the guy who managed them wanted them to start dressing up in this really weird-assed costume. So that was the final straw. So I came back here and joined in an R&B band that that was also playing out in the province. They were Canadians and we were really good, but we had really bad luck with the business end of it. The jobs we got were wrong. We'd be booked into a country and western place and stuff like that would happen to us all the time. And people were just... finally we were just at each other's throats. So we...I quit that. That was the time in 1967, right at the beginning of the summer of '67 when everyone was dropping acid and stuff. Kinda losing all ground. Why go ahead and play commercial music when you can sit home and commune with the spirits? So I just said well hell, I'll quit.

What was it like playing in the provinces?

Living in a hotel room and eating hotel food every day, get up, go on and play the job and drink maybe two beers for every wat-doyoucall them...break. And ah, try and find a woman, yeah sure, smoke some dope and then go to bed. And then get up and do it again the next day.

Was it a real drag or did you like it?

Sometimes the music was real good. With people dancing sometimes you can really...rock and roll, you know. And that part of it was great, but the rest of it, you know in a strange town, you don't know anybody. Little towns, all the movies in French and stuff, German and whatever. There was nothin' to do, write letters, go sit in the bar and watch the television...hockey games.

What was the name of this group you were with?

Les Astronauts. Our R&B group was called the John Cold Water Group. They were good, we were good. Then I came back to Montreal after that and I laid around doin' nothin' like ah goin' in to wantin' to be a guru type thing. Not a lot but some. And ah by winter time I was really just sick of just sittin' around, havin' other people support me. Went out and did a single thing. Just by myself playing guitar and singing. Kinda rock and roll electric.

Did you start out playing electric or acoustic guitar?

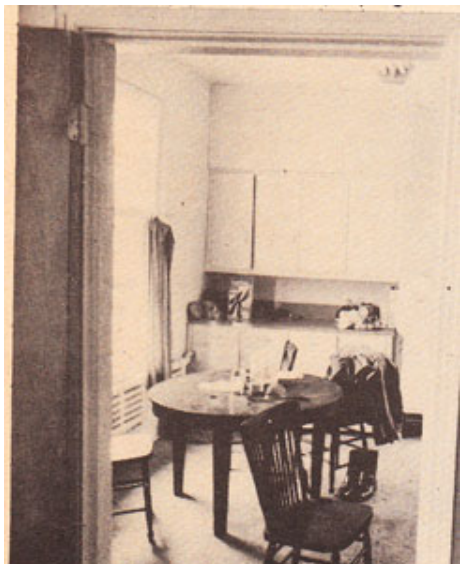
I started out playin' electric. I never played acoustic.

You don't like doing these interviews?

Not really, it's ah... pretty artificial.

You play guitar and I don't?

You write.



How many groups did you play with before you did your first album?

Maybe 15. Only one French group, one German group. We did only a couple of songs in German. Most people in Denmark and Germany and Holland don't want to hear about any Danish or German or Dutch music, they want to hear English music.

How many groups were you in in Canada since you came here?

Maybe five or six.

Did you cut any records during this time?

Cut a record with that French group. Singles. Nothing happened. One Canadian group I was in up here, we cut a single, I never heard of that again. Nothin' happened, I'm sure.

Did any of these records do well?

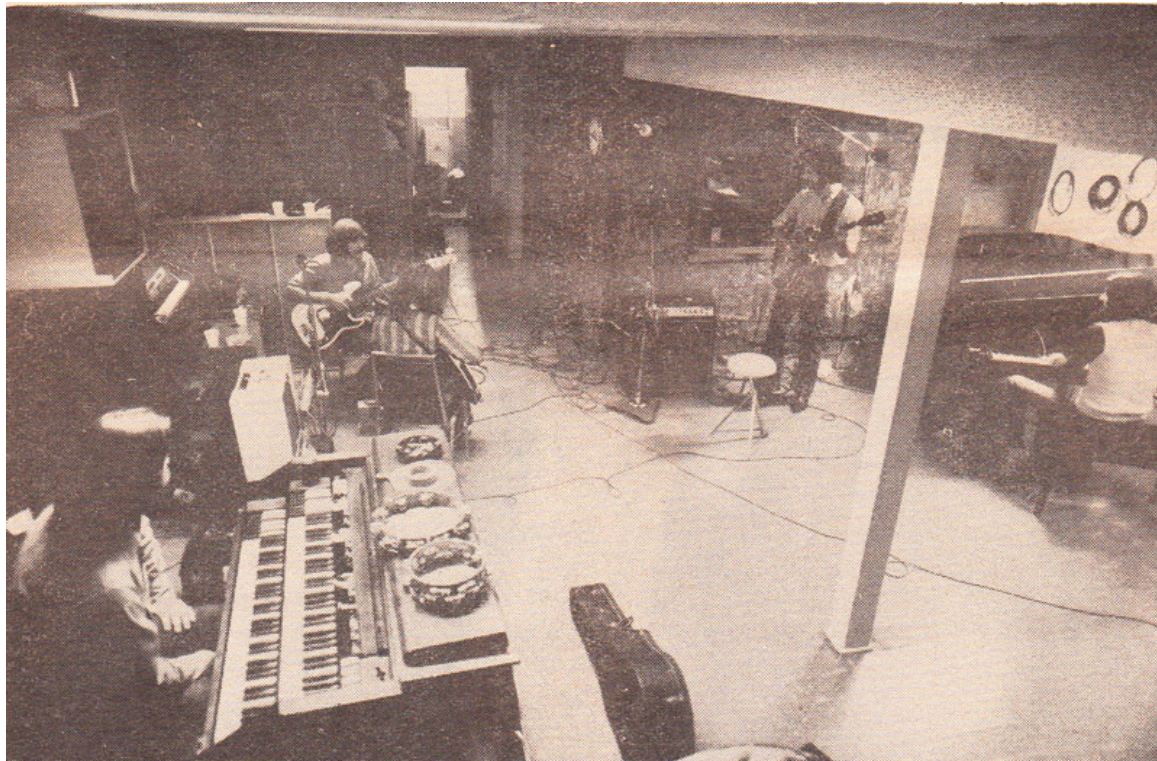
None.

Let it go, let it go, go, go

Let it go, let it go, go, go

Let it go, let all that nonsense go

*I holed up in Memphis with this chick I knew from before
Oh, she let me drive her Cadillac, her daddy had three or four more
But I felt despised and patronized 'cause I was poor
So I left Memphis just in time save my skin
Some friends of the chick's old man went and turned me in
But it was a groove to be on the move again*



So what happened between playing with these groups and your first album?

I played as a single for quite awhile. And ah hanging around Montreal and I was with my first ah...well we weren't married...my first old lady, you would say. I was trying to get that together and ah that's about all I was doin'. I was writin' a lot in those days, writin' a lot of songs. But they were real kinda, I don't know. When you play by yourself you really just, I don't just, I don't like it too much. Worked around some but you know, not too many people out in the province want to hear one guy come up with a guitar. So I'd rather play with the bands, more fun.

How did the album happen?

Oh, we were makin' a tape someplace in Ottawa, with a friend of mine who deserted from the army. He owned a four-track Ampex tape recorder, so we were making a tape. Robbie Roberson came down with a guy that I knew fairly well, like an acquaintance of mine. We'd just done a real good cut and we played it for Robbie and he liked it, and so we said what I should do would be make a demo tape and he would take it down to Albert Grossman. So that's what happened. That's how the record got made.

What was Robbie doing up here?

Robbie's from Canada and his wife is from Montreal. Dominique is from Montreal. Robbie comes up to Montreal periodically. Robbie's a real nice guy.

So, Albert like the tape?

Yeh, Albert liked it. That was in January 1969, I think.

Did you do your album soon after that?

No, it wasn't until September or October. Robbie's really busy, he's in demand. And then it wasn't until April or March that it was released.

Why aren't you having Robbie do this album?

Well, Robbie's too busy. And besides that, I'd like a change.

How did you decide on Todd Rundgren, because you've worked with him before?

Yeh. Well, Todd is really good. He's very good at what he does.

What do you think of his album?

I like some of the tracks on it. I didn't like all of them, but it's just a matter of taste. I know Todd's good. We just play such different things, it's hard for me to ... I like it because it's really Todd...the tracks that I like are the ones that just really got himself in them, like "I'm In the Clink," and some of those really raunchy things, I really like. "We Gotta Getcha A Woman" I didn't dig too much. And things like that that were on the album I didn't dig too much.

But you think he'll be a really good producer?

Oh yeh! Obviously, I don't know, it's not too good to talk about him when he's not here. Not that I'm not going to say anything nice about him. I dig him for what he contributes to the thing. I don't think any one person is the group's got "it". A little bit of everybody there should make it a fantastic album. Todd will be Todd, and everyone just gives their ideas. Todd can hear it from the control room where we might not be able to hear it together.

*Let it go, let it go, go, go
Let it go, let it go, go, go
Let it go, let all that nonsense go*

*New York City was always a place I wanted to see
And with eight million people there
How they ever gonna find me?*

*The bus takes a day and hitch hikin' might take three
I like New York so much I decided to stay
Until my draft board classified me One-A
So that was it for the States Jack
I split the very next day, singin'
Let it go, let all that non-sense go*

Do you like it up here better than in the States?

Yeh. Oh man yeh. There's no question. No question.

Why? It's not so up tight, people friendlier?

Well, there's more restraint up here, people aren't so loose about their feelings. Bein' fooled when you want to be the fool. They don't do that so much. But then things run smoother. Everybody just goes their own way. You want to do that, okay, good, as long as you don't bother me. That kind of thing, you know, and that's really nice.

Did you ever live in New York City at all?

For awhile, a very little while. But that was a long time ago. I know New York has changed, so much since I was there, it's not even worth talking about it. Well it's a lot more...whatever. Whatever it's doin' it's a lot more of it. It seems, just by what you hear.

What have you done between the last album and this one?

Played jobs, mainly just around Montreal. Made some tapes with friends and stuff and just played music. Eat, drink, and make love and make music, that's about it.

Do you have to do a set number of records for Ampex?

No. Maybe if you are a big star then you have to make a certain number of records, probably. Like I'm in a position that they just might "let" me make another record. "Cause if you don't make them any money....

Your record was fairly successful

Right, so I'm making another one, see. But not until that happened were they going to put up any more money into it, 'cause money is scarce these days. I'd like to get enough money to have a studio and ah maybe some kind of vehicle.

A studio for your own things and whatever else you wanted to record?

Yeh. Whatever, just to have it there for whatever you want to do. 'Cause I really just love it, what I do. So if I could just fix it up where I could just get it as homey as possible. That would really do it for me. Family and that.

So you foresee staying in Canada?

As opposed to what? I have no choice.

*Now I live in a room in downtown Montreal
And I'm too far away to even hear my draft board call
But still I can't relax
For fear that the ax will fall*

*But I keep sayin'
Let it go, let it go, go, go
Let all that bullshit go*





Remembering that last time I was in Montreal with the same shoulder-length hair and the consequent icy treatment from the French with an occasional indecipherable comment screamed from a car window, I was relieved to find a city and the people that, contrary to the United States, has accepted and assimilated its long-haired youth into society in general. The only place I felt I stuck out like a sore was the Holiday Inn, a plush multi-barred business-pleasure dome running down, not to a sunless sea, but to a marble lobby full of American businessmen who regarded us (myself, Jeff my photographer from the magazine, Jesse and the Full Tilt Boogie Band) with something like amazement. What are all those long-haired guys doing in this sterile clean-cut hotel? My hair was much longer than the norm which elicited curious gazes, but once people were personally encountered, everything was fine. A middle-aged saleslady in Simpsons, the Montreal Bloomingdales, even took me for a schoolboy when I bought some notebooks.

After a few days of such genial and friendly treatment I began to wonder what the Canadian youth do to rebel? Clothing styles seem to be middle-class. American collegiate with touches here and there of army khaki or, on the other hand, effete Parisian styles somewhat less affected than New York East side continental. Music doesn't seem to be a social force and extremist politics are scorned by most. But it's hard to be radical in a city that is immobilized a good portion of the year from snow storms...

*I was tuning in the 6 o'clock newcast
When the weatherman mentioned snow
As soon as I heard that four letter word
I was making my plans to go.*

But Jesse hasn't acted on those plans for the four years he's been in Canada. He maintains he's happy in Canada, and rationally he is.



Do you foresee staying in Canada?

As opposed to what? I have no choice.

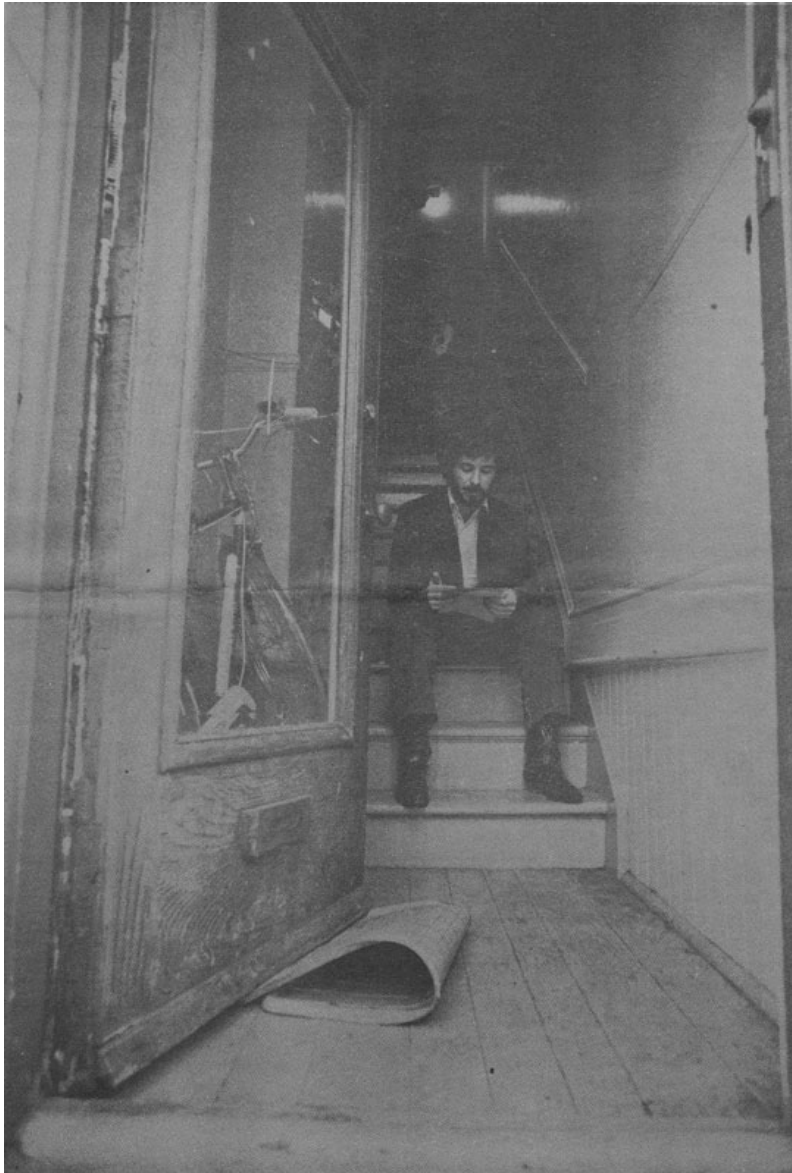
Any other country you'd rather go to?

No, Canada, 'cause they took me in.

Do you want to stay in Montreal?

Yeh, maybe in the eastern townships, 60 miles outside town. It's beautiful.





Photos by Jeffrey Kliman

But it's also dull. No matter how evil the United States is, it's still big, energetic, nasty, suicidal, vast and exciting – a nation living in the image of the 19th century Romanticism, but pulled apart by 20th century technology. Canada is gentle and quiet in comparison but not much of a place to live out big thumping fantasies of awe and glory. Despite his seeming indifference and hardness, despite his gentleness and modesty, Jesse is a classic romantic figure. He is possessed of a vision that makes his lean body tense and nervous, teeth gritting within a set mouth, eyes open wide taking in everything they can devour. That's what Jesse wants though – to devour things, people and life in a Grail-like search for a satisfaction that will never come to be, because if it did, the vision and romance would disappear with its coming. A vision transcends life and is captured and solidified as art, but art is only the means, not the end, to the search for the dwelling place of the vision. Jesse is on the make for his visions just like he's on the make for women, love and music, all of which are aspects of his metaphysical lust:
"Have you ever seen me when I didn't look horny?"

Steven Fuller

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*Zygote Magazine – January 8, 1971*  
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