

MINSTREL IN MONTREAL

by David Armstrong
 "In the year of 1967 there was a somewhat younger man/ Call to bloody glory came, and I would not raise my hand/ 'Cause I'm baptised by water, so I pass on the one by fire."

--Jesse Winchester
 "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt"

I
 December, and everything in Montreal was frozen beyond appeal. Car doors were sealed shut. The hinges in your fingertips were loath to bend at all. Even the liquid

of McGill University, was the most unprepossessing of the lot, a cramped basement room that seated maybe 40 customers with the aid of a shoehorn. But it only cost a quarter to get in.

The place was a haven for semi-pro folk acts and apprentice Leonard Cohens from McGill to play. There were weekly hoots and meeting rooms for political groups upstairs. Otherwise, it was a favorite of students and heads who were into Eastern religions, outlandish psychic wet dreams and the draft dodger's companion, paranoia --

music that would stay with me for a long, long while. It was music that, to paraphrase a line from "Yankee Lady," reminded those who heard it of their worth. It was music, I felt then, that would endure.

II

That was nearly seven years ago and tonight Jesse Winchester's most recent letter from Montreal, a long playing record called *Learn to Love It*, is sitting on the turntable.

In my case, the anticipated induction notice that pointed me

Country folk and rock clubs counted for something.

This release hasn't the richness of texture that Jesse Winchester, his debut album of nearly five years ago, had. Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm and Todd Rundgren made key contributions to that effort, and their combined talents are impossible to duplicate. *Learn to Love It* is closer in tone and scope to *Third Down, 110 to Go*, his second LP, and is in many ways a direct extension of it.

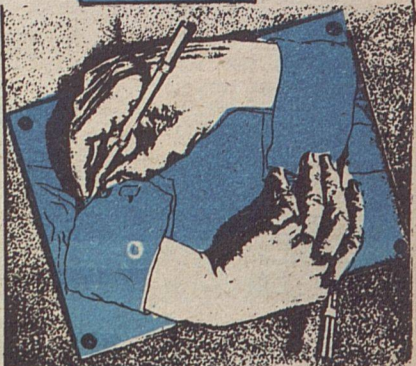
Learn to Love It, like *Third Down*, is a homegrown product recorded with Canadian studio musicians, with Winchester producing. Like *Third Down*, it is a conscious fusion of Jesse's Memphis roots with his Canadian experience. Winchester acknowledges this by placing a fleur-de-lis on the album jacket and writing two songs in French. "L'Air de La Louisiane" is a soft, melodic composition, while "Laisse Les Bons Temps Rouler," bottom-lined by Jesse's barrelhouse piano, has the rollicking feel of a communal drinking song.

Winchester has lost none of his gifts as a songwriter. He has the ability to develop perceptive and often moving musical statements with economy and restraint. His fine touch extends to other people's material, too. The three non-originals on *Learn to Love It* effectively complement his own songs, and are equally well written.

Winchester's controlled use of understatement lends a deceptive simplicity to his music that fades with repeated listenings. At its best, his work is characterized by an implicit tension between intimacy and distance, resilience and vulnerability, pervaded by an air of melancholy. This is perhaps more clearly present on *Learn to Love It* than either of his previous releases, particularly on songs like "How Far to the Horizon" and Russell Smith's "The End is Not in Sight."

Both songs are aching confessions of need. Both are allegorical accounts of walking alone along weary roads towards a goal that moves from you exactly as fast as you approach it, the songs' sense of longing underscored by Jesse's urgent phrasing. And, as Jesse puts it on "Horizon": "It's nothing but my faith that says I'll be there by and by." Indeed, it is Winchester's faith (and wit) that keeps that air of melancholy from becoming suffocating. The album both opens and closes with personalized statements of belief, broached in distinctly different ways.

"Wake Me," the opener, is a good-natured plea for a Zen-style slap in the face to clear the cobwebs, while Martha Carson's "I Can't Stand Up Alone," the album's closing cut, is a straightforward



admission of the need of "a mighty hand" to deal with worldly trouble. "Wake Me," with its gospel chorus and Amos Garret's succinct guitar work, is a spirited rocker.

The echoed vocals and double-tracked chorus on Winchester's a capella version of "Stand Up," however, detract from, rather than add to, his performance. Jesse has been doing this song since his days at the Yellow Door, and the magic and intimacy of those performances will probably forever remain beyond the ability of the recording medium to capture.

"Defying Gravity" and the droll "Third Rate Romance" (another Russell Smith tune) are done mostly for fun. Jesse's reworking of "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," a 1930's folk commentary on hard times, is a satirical vehicle for the most explicit anti-war statement he has yet made in song. He adds the names of Canadian Prime Ministers Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau to that of FDR as "the poor man's friend" in this gospel send-up of a different kind of hard times. At first listening you don't know whether to laugh or cry. (Mostly, I laughed.)

Jesse also contributes a pair of beautifully done love songs, one written for a woman, another to a place -- or, more accurately, to the memory of a place. The delicate "Every Word You Say" is one for his lady. "Mississippi, You've Been on My Mind" is his homage to the American South, with a sensual recall of detail that can only be drawn from childhood dreamscapes: "I think I smell the honeysuckle vine/ the heavy sweetness like to make me sick/ And the dogs, my God, they're hungry all the time/ and the snakes are sleeping where the weeds are thick."

Winchester's seemingly effortless singing and his work on rhythm guitar, piano and flute are nearly always first rate. But his musicianship would count for little were it not for the resonance and emotional authenticity he brings to this material, a resonance that seems to spring from his realization that you can find sustenance -- even love -- walking that weary road.



in your eyes seemed to solidify in the sharp wind that blew off the grey-white stillness of the St. Lawrence River. Giant blue and white snowplows prowled the streets by night -- clanking, groaning apparitions beneath the city streetlights.

It was difficult to believe that anyone could routinely accommodate themselves to such things. But there they were, two million of them, long-time Canadians, to whom this was just another winter. They dealt with this hoary intrusion with a mixture of elan and street sense that was almost awe-inspiring.

Montreal's American community, which began mushrooming in the Vietnam escalation year of 1966 and was hundreds strong by the winter of 1967-68, was not faring as well. We were not attuned to the extremes of the North, few of us were fluent in French -- Quebec's mother tongue -- and almost none of us were working regularly. Survival was a daily reality that winter, and you had to hustle just to stand still.

A musician named Jesse Winchester was one of the American war resisters who was safe-harboring in Montreal that year. He blew across the border during the summer months when his number came up in Uncle Sam's death lottery.

Like most of us, he was going hungry in those first months -- a thin, bearded guy with serious dark eyes, who sat alone in the Yellow Door cafe, nursing a cup of coffee, speaking once in a while in a soft, Southern-accented voice. Unlike most of us, he was self-employed; he played guitar and sang his own songs to small, but appreciative audiences around town.

Jesse got his start at the Yellow Door, one of the three clubs on the absurdly abridged coffeehouse circuit of the day. The Yellow Door, centrally located among the rooming houses and fraternities

sometimes a combination of all three. It was, in short, a classic hippie joint.

Jesse would sit on a stool on the small wooden stage there, tapping time with both feet, as he played a slightly amplified guitar. He sang in a clear, quiet voice and you could see it was a struggle for him to pull his songs out from behind his shyness. Sometimes the shyness, an otherwise becoming reluctance to call attention to himself, won out; but he could be a moving performer.

I was taken immediately with a love song about a boy and a woman "in the hills of old Vermont" that shimmered in the silence it was always to invoke in an audience. The song was "Yankee Lady," the instant hit of an album he was to record several years later.

And he could rock and roll. Ripping into a little number he called "Payday," he had the audience nodding and tapping along, digging the story about a cat who just got paid, got into some wine and had the world in his back pocket that day.

There were songs about friendship, about solitude, about Jesus before it was hip for packaged L.A. country-rockers to sing about him. There was a playful Jesus song -- "Jesus Was a Teenager Too" -- to show he wasn't being adamant about it. And a serious one, sung a capella, a personal statement of faith that managed to stay clear of ponderous Johnny Cash sentiments.

Winchester, then and now, is a fine performer -- even a brilliant one -- when he allows himself to be. His performances, like his recordings, are never obtrusive or self-important. His songs seep into your consciousness like water into the earth: no fuss, no bother, no hurry. If you can dig it, fine. If not... maybe next time.

I crunched across the snow in Mount Royal Park after hearing Winchester for the first time, convinced that I had come upon

North never arrived. Three years of hassling and petty bureaucratic intrigue saw to that. For many others, including Jesse, it did, and Jerry Ford's offer of conditional amnesty will not directly benefit many of them. For Jesse Winchester, these thin vinyl offerings will have to represent his musicianship until people can see and hear him here in person.

Fortunately, as recordings go, they'll do quite nicely. *Learn to Love It* is a well-crafted synthesis of humor, reverence and funk that serves as a worthy addition to his previous work. Like his two earlier LP's, it is an accurate gauge of his musical growth in exile, and convincing evidence that those years of paying dues in North

