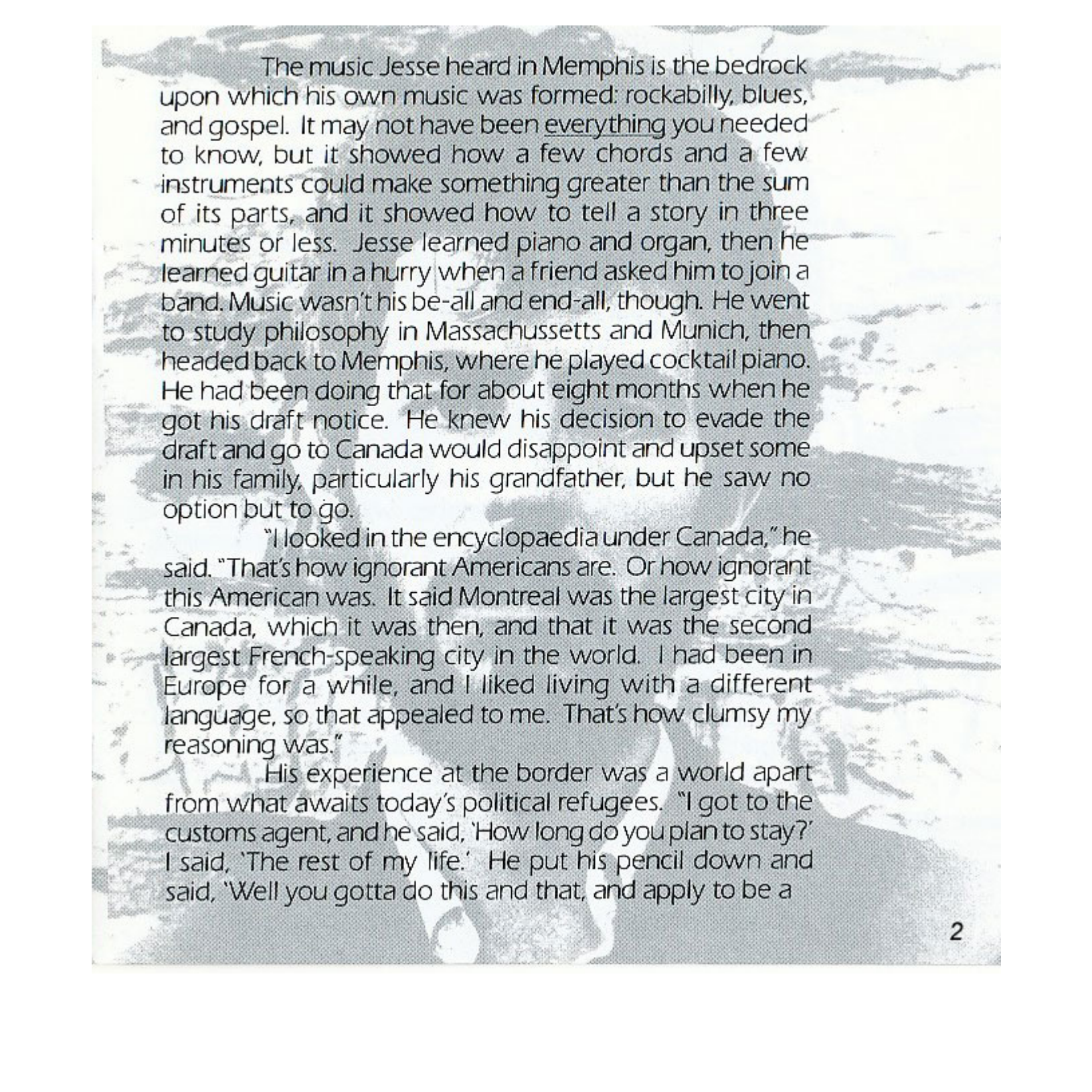


On some level, if you want to be a star, talent is immaterial. You have to want it badly. Badly. That's where Jesse Winchester ultimately fell short. He had, and still has, a reluctance to thrust himself into the spotlight and scream 'Look at me!' The paradox is that he has written songs of consistent commerciality, and works hard to enforce a commercial discipline in his writing. His voice has been framed in many ways, thanks to a succession of producers and different time zones, but the songs have always been strong—remarkably so for someone who usually works without co-writers. It's hard to think of anyone who has written songs of such quality over a twenty-five year period. We see no slow slide into self-parody, no rejuggling of tired cliches.

Jesse James Winchester was born in Bossier City, Louisiana, across the Red River from Shreveport, on May 17, 1944. His father, James Ridout Winchester, was stationed there, and, after the war ended, he sidestepped the family law practise in Memphis and tried farming. He had three farms—in Brooksville and Marigold, Mississippi, and in Capleville, Tennessee. "He was a hippie twenty-five years before his time," Jesse said to Doug Pringle. "Then he had a heart-attack and had to give up the heavy labor of farming, so he went to law school and joined the family law firm." This was when Jesse was around fourteen. The Winchesters were one of the founding families in Memphis, but, as Jesse points out, his branch of the family didn't show up until later. "It's a long story, boring to everybody except Winchesters," he says.



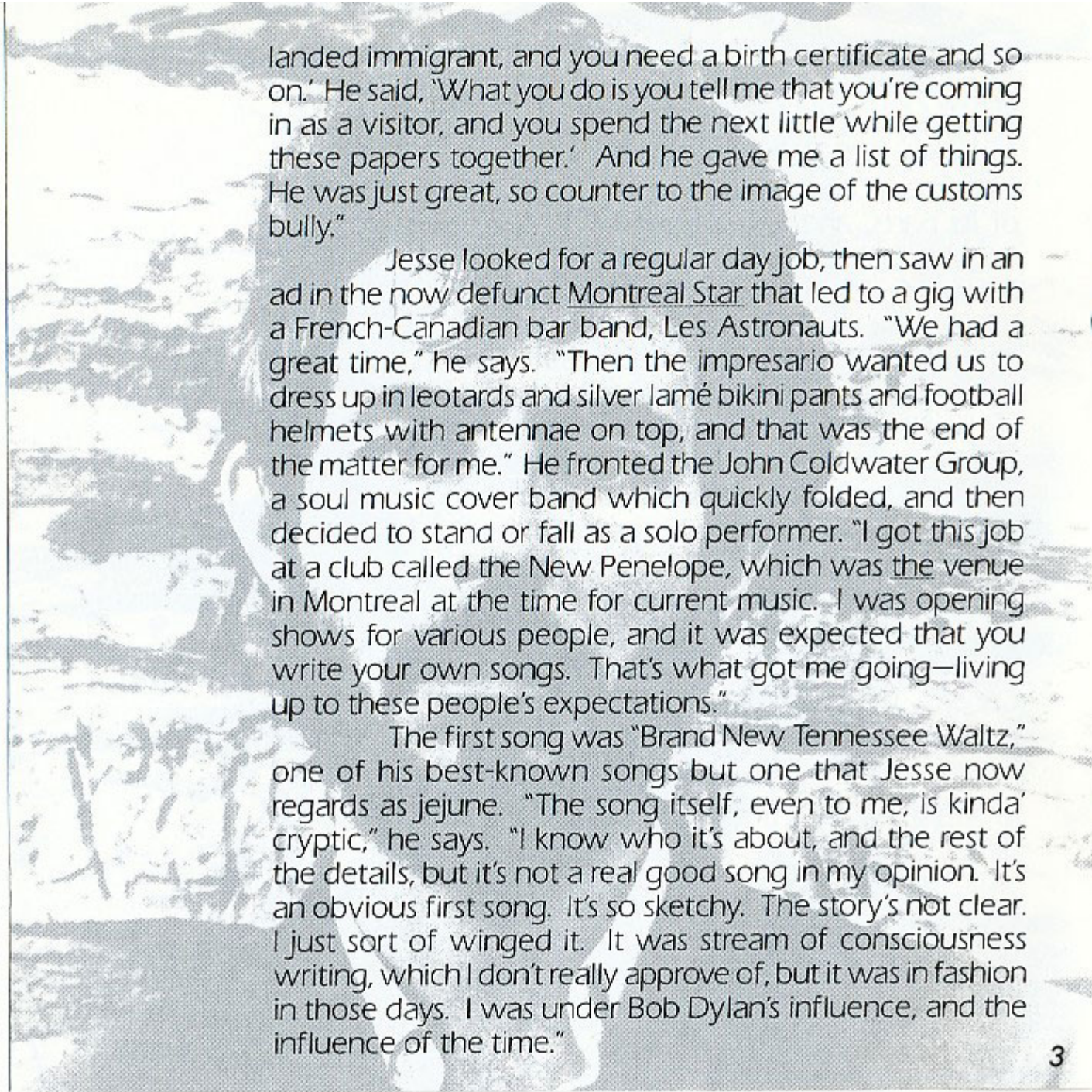


The music Jesse heard in Memphis is the bedrock upon which his own music was formed: rockabilly, blues, and gospel. It may not have been everything you needed to know, but it showed how a few chords and a few instruments could make something greater than the sum of its parts, and it showed how to tell a story in three minutes or less. Jesse learned piano and organ, then he learned guitar in a hurry when a friend asked him to join a band. Music wasn't his be-all and end-all, though. He went to study philosophy in Massachusetts and Munich, then headed back to Memphis, where he played cocktail piano. He had been doing that for about eight months when he got his draft notice. He knew his decision to evade the draft and go to Canada would disappoint and upset some in his family, particularly his grandfather, but he saw no option but to go.

"I looked in the encyclopaedia under Canada," he said. "That's how ignorant Americans are. Or how ignorant this American was. It said Montreal was the largest city in Canada, which it was then, and that it was the second largest French-speaking city in the world. I had been in Europe for a while, and I liked living with a different language, so that appealed to me. That's how clumsy my reasoning was."

His experience at the border was a world apart from what awaits today's political refugees. "I got to the customs agent, and he said, 'How long do you plan to stay?' I said, 'The rest of my life.' He put his pencil down and said, 'Well you gotta do this and that, and apply to be a



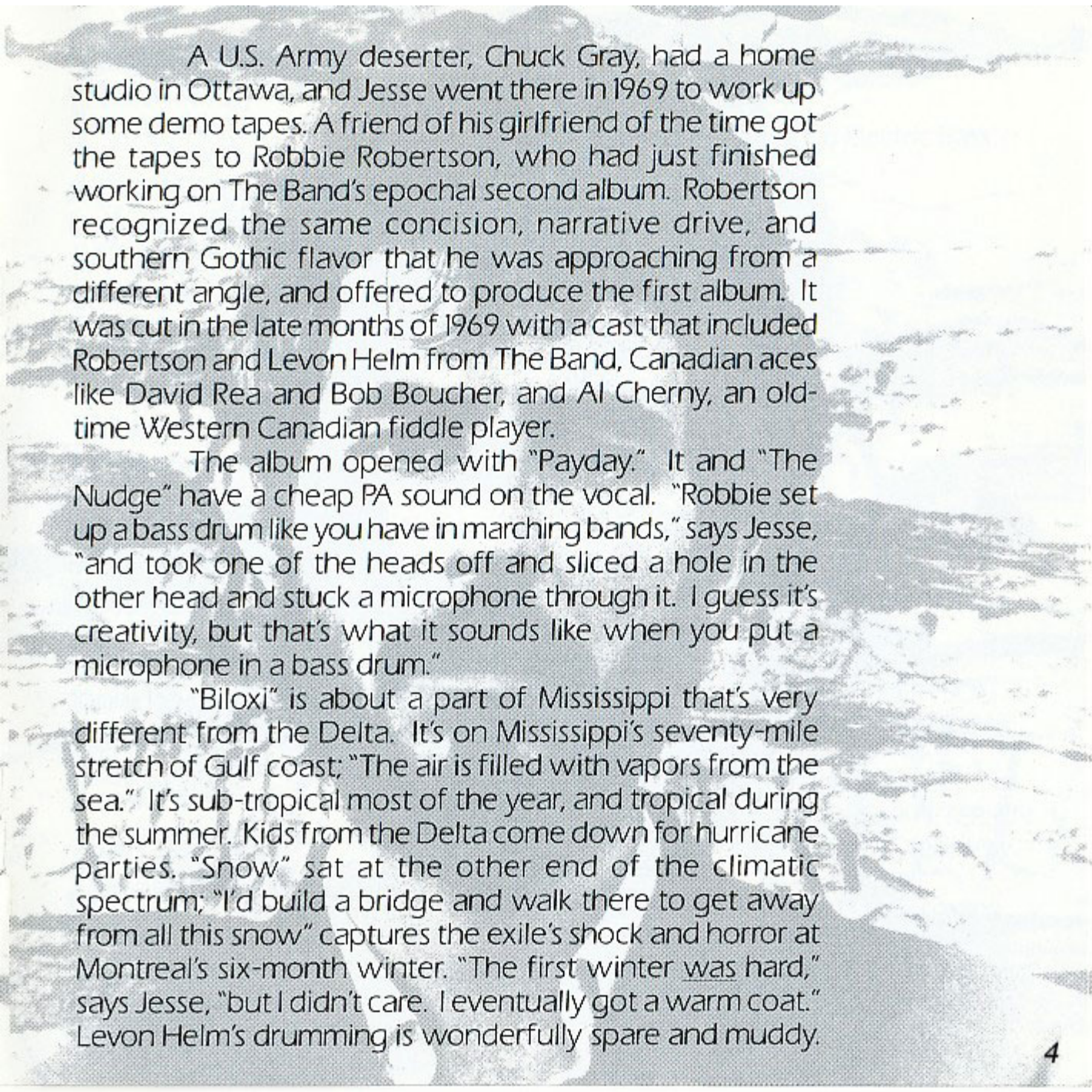


landed immigrant, and you need a birth certificate and so on.' He said, 'What you do is you tell me that you're coming in as a visitor, and you spend the next little while getting these papers together.' And he gave me a list of things. He was just great, so counter to the image of the customs bully."

Jesse looked for a regular day job, then saw in an ad in the now defunct Montreal Star that led to a gig with a French-Canadian bar band, Les Astronauts. "We had a great time," he says. "Then the impresario wanted us to dress up in leotards and silver lamé bikini pants and football helmets with antennae on top, and that was the end of the matter for me." He fronted the John Coldwater Group, a soul music cover band which quickly folded, and then decided to stand or fall as a solo performer. "I got this job at a club called the New Penelope, which was the venue in Montreal at the time for current music. I was opening shows for various people, and it was expected that you write your own songs. That's what got me going—living up to these people's expectations."

The first song was "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," one of his best-known songs but one that Jesse now regards as jejune. "The song itself, even to me, is kinda' cryptic," he says. "I know who it's about, and the rest of the details, but it's not a real good song in my opinion. It's an obvious first song. It's so sketchy. The story's not clear. I just sort of winged it. It was stream of consciousness writing, which I don't really approve of, but it was in fashion in those days. I was under Bob Dylan's influence, and the influence of the time."



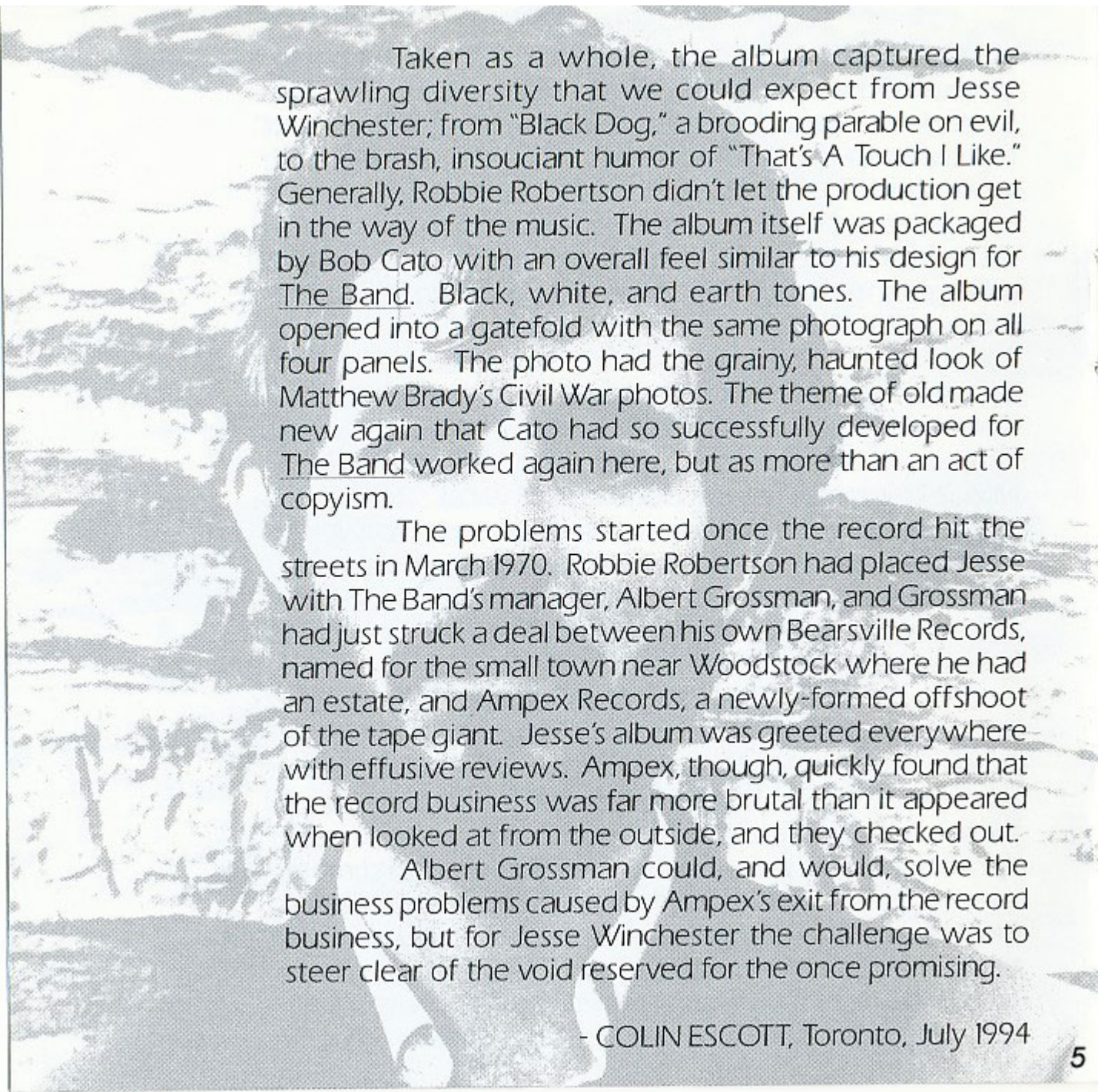


A U.S. Army deserter, Chuck Gray, had a home studio in Ottawa, and Jesse went there in 1969 to work up some demo tapes. A friend of his girlfriend of the time got the tapes to Robbie Robertson, who had just finished working on The Band's epochal second album. Robertson recognized the same concision, narrative drive, and southern Gothic flavor that he was approaching from a different angle, and offered to produce the first album. It was cut in the late months of 1969 with a cast that included Robertson and Levon Helm from The Band, Canadian aces like David Rea and Bob Boucher, and Al Cherny, an old-time Western Canadian fiddle player.

The album opened with "Payday." It and "The Nudge" have a cheap PA sound on the vocal. "Robbie set up a bass drum like you have in marching bands," says Jesse, "and took one of the heads off and sliced a hole in the other head and stuck a microphone through it. I guess it's creativity, but that's what it sounds like when you put a microphone in a bass drum."

"Biloxi" is about a part of Mississippi that's very different from the Delta. It's on Mississippi's seventy-mile stretch of Gulf coast; "The air is filled with vapors from the sea." It's sub-tropical most of the year, and tropical during the summer. Kids from the Delta come down for hurricane parties. "Snow" sat at the other end of the climatic spectrum; "I'd build a bridge and walk there to get away from all this snow" captures the exile's shock and horror at Montreal's six-month winter. "The first winter was hard," says Jesse, "but I didn't care. I eventually got a warm coat." Levon Helm's drumming is wonderfully spare and muddy.





Taken as a whole, the album captured the sprawling diversity that we could expect from Jesse Winchester; from "Black Dog," a brooding parable on evil, to the brash, insouciant humor of "That's A Touch I Like." Generally, Robbie Robertson didn't let the production get in the way of the music. The album itself was packaged by Bob Cato with an overall feel similar to his design for The Band. Black, white, and earth tones. The album opened into a gatefold with the same photograph on all four panels. The photo had the grainy, haunted look of Matthew Brady's Civil War photos. The theme of old made new again that Cato had so successfully developed for The Band worked again here, but as more than an act of copyism.

The problems started once the record hit the streets in March 1970. Robbie Robertson had placed Jesse with The Band's manager, Albert Grossman, and Grossman had just struck a deal between his own Bearsville Records, named for the small town near Woodstock where he had an estate, and Ampex Records, a newly-formed offshoot of the tape giant. Jesse's album was greeted everywhere with effusive reviews. Ampex, though, quickly found that the record business was far more brutal than it appeared when looked at from the outside, and they checked out.

Albert Grossman could, and would, solve the business problems caused by Ampex's exit from the record business, but for Jesse Winchester the challenge was to steer clear of the void reserved for the once promising.

- COLIN ESCOTT, Toronto, July 1994



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1. Payday (2:48)
  2. Biloxi (3:15)
  3. Snow (2:15)
  4. The Brand New Tennessee Waltz (3:04)
  5. That's a Touch I Like (2:44)
  6. Yankee Lady (3:58)
  7. Quiet About it (2:24)
  8. Skip Rope Song (2:22)
  9. Rosy Shy (3:00)
  10. Black Dog (4:37)
  11. The Nudge (3:25)

All songs written by Jesse Winchester  
except Snow by Jessie Winchester  
and Robbie Robertson  
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**SPCD 1198**

Originally released as AMPEX A-10104

- © Bearsville Records 1970
- © Stony Plain Records 1994

Made in Canada

JESSE WINCHESTER:  
Vocals, Guitar, Piano  
BOB BOUCHER:  
Fender and Stand-up Electric Bass  
DAVID REA:  
Guitar, Vibes, Vocal  
KEN PEARSON:  
Piano, Organ, Vibes  
DAVID LEWIS:  
Drums  
GUY BLACK:  
Drums  
AL CHERNEY:  
Violin  
LEVON HELM\*:  
Drums and Mandolin  
ROBBIE ROBERTSON\*:  
Guitar

\*Courtesy of Capital Records

Produced by: ROBBIE ROBERTSON  
Engineered by: TODD RUNDGREN  
Designer: BOB CATO  
Photo by: JEREMY TAYLOR  
Reissue Producer: HOLGER PETERSEN  
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