

Winchester revisited

Self-imposed seclusion ends with new album, first show in nearly a decade

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"I am chastened," Jesse Winchester says with gentle sarcasm, humbly pleading guilty to recidivism. He has barely thrown open the door of his home near Magog when his Southern gentility is rebuffed, and he is accused of breaking a vow made five years ago on these very premises.

In January 1995, Winchester confirmed what most fans of his soulful roots music had long taken for granted, that his soft slide into semi-retirement was now a hardened decision to never perform in public again. Now, as he settled into his couch, his "welcome back" was return-volleyed. Winchester's recent album, *Gentleman of Leisure*, has led to a show tonight at the Spectrum, his first in about nine years. With a Bible on a nearby end table offering "a constant reprimand," he is asked to explain, and offers three reasons.

"I got divorced for the second and, I hope, the last time a couple of years ago," a ruction that made other shifts more possible, even necessary. It brought a "sense of freedom that was drunk-making, really," and, after seven years of marriage, the newfound bachelorhood that can only lead to honky-tonking. He had one album left on his contract with Sugar Hill records. Then

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there are the twin motivations of the recording artist, "greed and ambition. I'd love to be rich, but that's really shameful."

Those arguments are all valid, and just as easily dismantled. Divorce could have sent him in the other direction, to more seclusion. He speaks fondly of his ex-wife, the "superwoman" responsible for the paintings on his walls, and for installing the ferociously efficient wood stove in his living room. Speaking in a voice soft enough to float away down a lazy river, Winchester is not looking for a single man's rock'n'roll vengeance on his old life. He has two shows booked, one here and one in Kingston.

The record deal was so contractually demanding that Winchester recorded a total of no albums over the last 11 years, and evidence of his greed was everywhere around us: the wood stove, the high angled ceiling of his comfortable but compact country home, the book-lined shelves and modestly modern TV.

At this point, the singer's reflective voice hardened with the real certainty underpinning those explanations. "You can change your ... mahnd," he said, from experience.

We will credit fate or sixth sense for having brought us to Winchester's house 33 years and one day after he booked a flight from Memphis to Montreal on Robert E. Lee's birthday. Winchester is a fifth cousin of the Confederate general, and one shelf in his bookcase is devoted to U.S. Civil War histories, but in 1967 Winchester was leaving his behind. He dodged the Vietnam draft and landed in the Plateau, a "foolhardy" 22-year-old without a game plan beyond freedom. He had picked Montreal out of an encyclopedia entry about Canada.

Three years later, his self-titled debut, produced by Robbie Robertson, was on the shelves of discerning listeners. Subsequent albums solidified his reputation, but the songs on Jesse Winchester - the shadows of mortality

in Black Dog, the resonating melancholy of Biloxi - seem, like a handful of Band songs, to have been received rather than written.

At 55, Winchester is resolutely beyond even the farthest tentacles of the sleek and punishing cyborg of the record industry. Asked what he listens to these days, he said "country, and when I'm in the South, gospel." He loves R&B, but as defined by a Motown loyalist who wouldn't recognize R. Kelly or Mary J. Blige if they were strip-o-gramming in his living room.

"I like romantic, sentimental things." Winchester is, in the strictest business terms, irrelevant to the great mass of record buyers whose image of Woodstock is the "Dudestock '99" festival of frat-boy malevolence. He radiates an Old World civility and humble reverie quite at odds with the prevailing mind-and-age-set. Looked at another way, Winchester has no real competition out there.

There is also his subtle but perceptible desire to have a say in his own legacy. After dropping out of sight in the

mid/late '80s, Winchester was content to shop his songs to Nashville major-label pros through his agent and ease on down to his country mailbox, coffee mug in hand, to collect the royalties, which were considerable. The walls of a separate recording studio on his property bear gold and platinum albums by Wynona Judd and the Mavericks.

Winchester was also famous for having violated, in interview, the singer's code of devotion to the performing life. Even in the '70s and '80s, the only show Jesse wanted going on was Cheers, happiest when a canceled gig fit his TV schedule. Having

found new pleasures in live performance, he regrets his former reluctance.

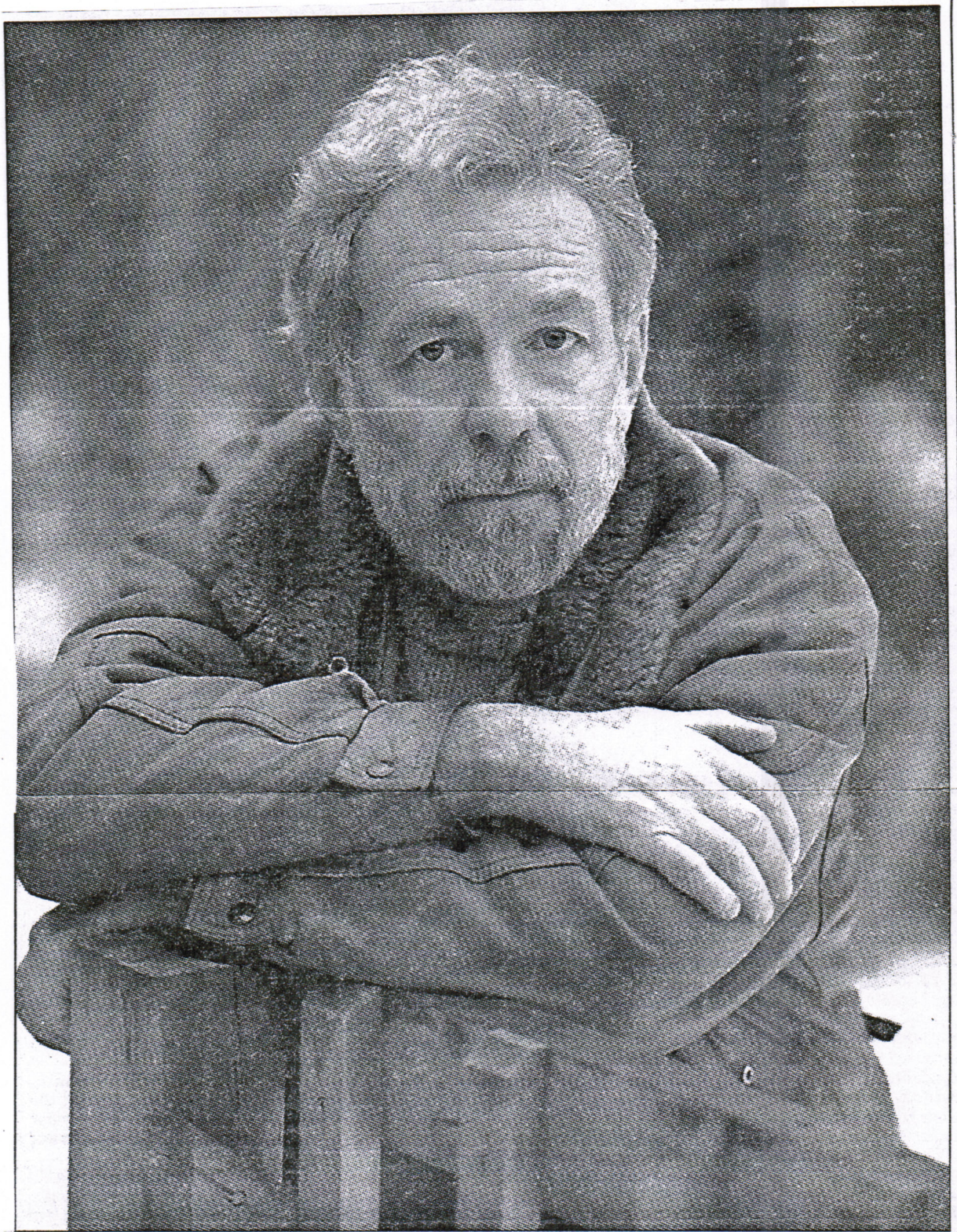
Does he write regularly? "No," he says emphatically. However, his lyrics run with a refined ease that belies it. On the new album, *Just Like New* opens with these rolling syllables: "That's the same engine under the hood/Carried young Elvis to Hollywood/Been cross country a time or two/And look at it now, it's just like new."

Winchester still believes that in Canada, "there's only Montreal, I'm sorry."

"I remember reading an interview with Elmore Leonard, who's one of my favourite writers. And he said something like, 'I work very hard to make this sound like I'm not writing.' I said yeah, that's exactly right. Really, it's more editing - cutting stuff out, and singing it over and over and over again so that when the singer delivers it, it doesn't sound like poetry. It sounds like somebody talking to you."

In some ways, Winchester might simply have spent too much time soaking up the Plateau when he first arrived. "I'm a Canadian, buddy," he asserts when the conversation turns to Americans abroad, and he still believes that in Canada, "there's only Montreal, I'm sorry." The Plateau, where '67 was much like '00, where the famously underachieving - even under-attempting - community always chooses quality of life over ambition. Winchester has thought about writing a book, but "I always find I've finished with my idea after three verses and a chorus."

❖ *Jesse Winchester performs with Loudon Wainwright III at the Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W., tonight at 8. Tickets cost \$23.50. Call (514) 861-5851.*



Jesse Winchester at his home near Magog in the Eastern Townships.

GORDON BECK, GAZETTE