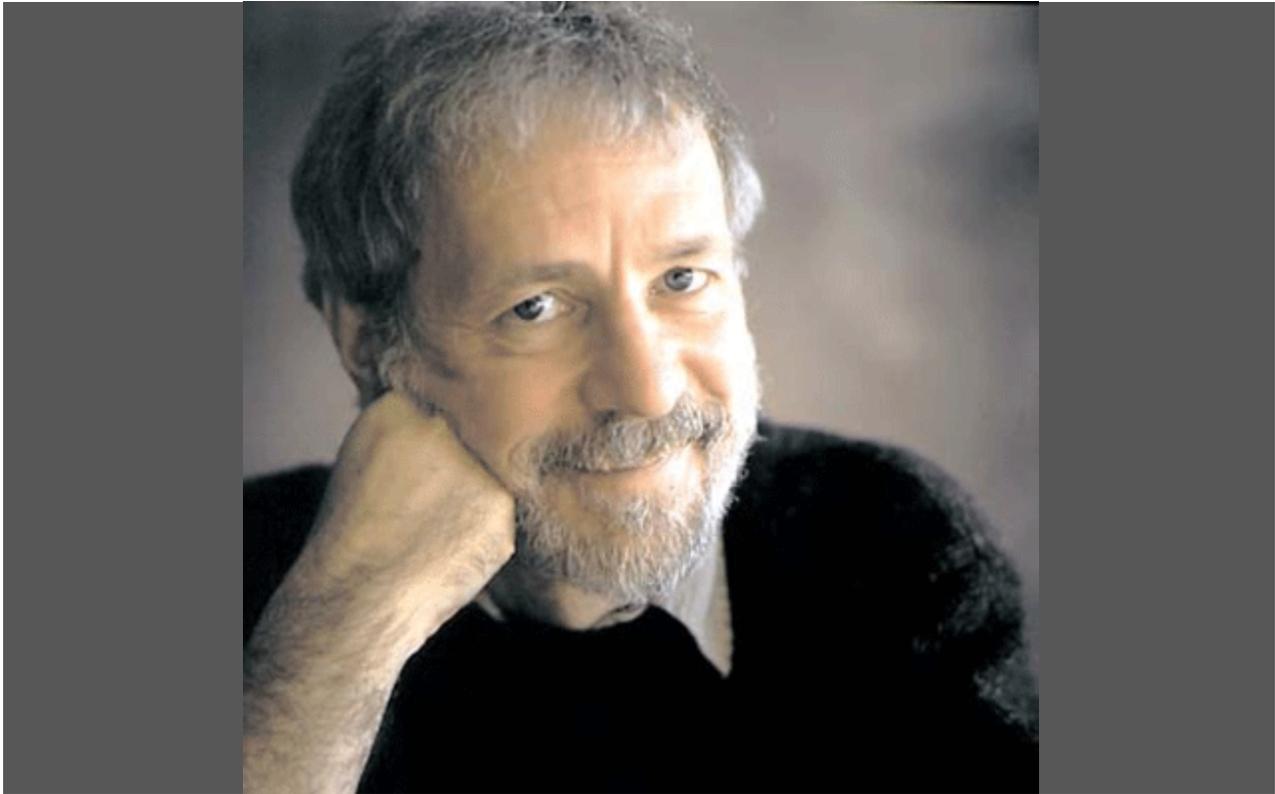


Taking Another Shot / Eclectic singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester cuts his first new album in 11 years

J. Poet – SF Chronicle – January 2001



Although he's been hailed by his peers as a songwriter's songwriter and widely praised for the low-key charm of his live performances, Jesse Winchester has been keeping a remarkably low profile for the past decade. The ironically titled "Gentleman of Leisure" (Sugar Hill) is Winchester's first recording in 11 years, and he seldom tours.

"I don't make much money from the records, touring can be aggravating and my taste, which runs to gospel, country and R&B, doesn't help radio programmers, who want to put you into an easy category," Winchester said in a gentle drawl that still echoes his Memphis upbringing, even after 30 years of self-imposed exile in Montreal.

To survive these days, Winchester, 56, concentrates on his back catalog and writes for Nashville's country music elite. "There's a lack of melody in most popular music. Today's pop is for children, which is fine. It's the way it should be, but St. Paul said something about becoming a man and putting away childish things, so I listen to country music. You can still hear strong melodies, and you can understand the words."

For the past decade, Winchester's made a comfortable living on songwriting royalties. ("Although I hate to say it out loud -- comfortable being such a relative term -- and the nature of the music business being what it is.") The Mavericks covered "Oh What a Thrill," Wynonna included "Let's Make a Baby King" on her second solo outing and Reba McEntire put "You Remember Me" on one of her multiplatinum albums. "I made a phenomenal amount of money on the Reba cut," Winchester said. "It allowed me to pay alimony to two ex-wives for a couple of years. I'd love to have a big hit single, but I'm stuck with what I can do, so I do the best I can.

"In fact, until this album, I thought of the records as elaborate demos, but (producer and ace dobro player) Jerry Douglas brought in Steve Cropper (Booker T. & the MG's, Wilson Pickett), Vince Gill and the Fairfield Four (a gospel quartet) and made it so much fun. I'm already looking forward to the next one."

The experience has also erased, at least temporarily, Winchester's reluctance to play live dates. "I don't take a band with me, which is cheaper and easier. There's nothing like the freedom of a live performance. No set list, no nothing. Just me and my guitar and the audience."

Winchester grew up in Memphis in a solid middle-class family and, despite rumors to the contrary, is no relation to the man who invented the rifle that bears the family name. Like many young men, he was partially drawn to music because it attracted members of the opposite sex. "Music was always a big part of my identity. The first thing I'd tell a pretty girl was that I was a guitar player.

"My mother says that I was musical since I was a baby. (My parents) got me piano lessons when I was a kid, and I played organ in the local church from the age of 12, but that wasn't a reflection of my talent, it just showed how desperate the (church was.)

"I wanted to be like Steve Cropper, a guitar player who made other people sound good. Songwriting never occurred to me until I got to Canada."

Winchester played guitar and keyboards in a succession of rock and R&B bands during his teens and young adulthood but was on a more academic track. He studied Latin and English literature and earned a degree in German in 1967. Then he got drafted.

"I was so mad about (Vietnam) that I couldn't even discuss it with anyone, and since I'm not a pacifist, I couldn't use that argument."

Winchester chose exile in Canada, and although he was toying with the idea of being a professional musician, he first tried for a day job. "I had to get landed immigrant status to stay in the country, and I didn't think listing my occupation as 'guitar player' would help. But I didn't speak French, so I started touring with various little R&B bands."

The pay for a touring musician, when he wasn't cheated out of it, was low, but in the early '70s the singer-songwriter movement was hot, "so I began playing solo in restaurants and coffeehouses. The money was good, you got paid and they expected you to write your own songs, so I did."

Winchester's heartfelt original tunes soon started a buzz, both from his fans and music business heavies. A friend introduced him to the Band's Robbie Robertson, who helped get Winchester signed to Bearsville Records. Robertson also produced Winchester's first two albums.

"(Robertson) had just finished 'Music From Big Pink,' which impressed me with its movement back toward tradition. There were no 30-minute guitar solos, just real songs, with real melodies, and respect for one's roots, all the things we seemed to be leaving behind. I would have been happy to meet him even if it hadn't led to a record deal."

Winchester traces his musical inclinations -- a low-key mixture of soul, rockabilly and gospel -- to Memphis radio personality Duey Phillips, "one of the best radio DJs ever. His show played a cocktail of black and white music, rockabilly, blues and R&B, all mixed up. He was also a big influence on Sam Phillips (no relation) and Sun Records."

"I try to write all the time, with a good melody, interesting instrumental parts -- which I arrange using my computer -- and words that make sense. When I'm not writing, I feel guilty, but I can't force it. I usually get a phrase and a bit of melody, and that seed has the implications of the entire song. What takes the most time is the polishing. I do a lot of editing and can put a song aside for quite a while if it still needs something. I write to entertain people and make a living. If there's any art in it, that's fine."

This last remark may seem strange coming from an unabashedly sentimental tunesmith,

one often noted for the spiritual feelings his tunes evoke in listeners.

"I go back and forth on the subject of self-expression versus entertainment,

especially on the gospel-flavored tunes. I have a profound love for gospel music. It touches me deeply and always has, but while some songs may have a gospel influence, which you can't escape growing up in a town like Memphis, they aren't gospel, or even religious. I heard a beautiful country hymn a few years back that said, 'I'm not religious, anyone, I just follow the Lord.' That says it for me. I fancy myself a feeble follower of Jesus."

Jesse Winchester The singer performs at 8 tonight at Freight & Salvage, 1111 Addison St., Berkeley. Tickets: \$17.50. Call (510) 548-1761 or (510) 762-2277 or go to www.freightandsalvage.com.

Winchester also performs at 8 p.m. Friday at Noe Valley Ministry, 1021 Sanchez St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$16 advance, \$18 day of show. Available at Streetlight Records, 3979 24th St., San Francisco, (415) 282-3550; Shambhala Books, 2482 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley, (510) 848-8443; Maximum Music, 1555 Fourth St., San Rafael, (415) 454-9262; or BASS(415) 478-2277.

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