

Jesse Winchester

By the Sweat of Your Brow

by Rod MacDonald
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It was all dark out there. Nothing could be seen beyond the brilliant spotlights, and the only sound was the Am7 chord stretching out into the distance of echoes.
By the time I heard applause, the promoter already had me backstage.

"Great set! All right! We're off to a good start now. Do you know there's 500 people out there?!"

But before I had time to say anything, the show, running late (and, being live radio, every second has to be accounted for), was moving on, and another thin white male adult with a guitar, Jesse Winchester, author of "Yankee Lady" and "Rhumba" walked out on the stage.

Upstairs waiting for his own set was Jerry Jeff Walker of "Mr. Bojangles" fame, clad in head-to-toe blue denim with handsewn emblems on every spare inch of cloth.

Another white male adult with a guitar, I thought, spinning his yarns of lonesome times and hard-learned lessons. Which comes first, the lonesome song or the lonesome times? Or do they keep winding themselves together until one chain of events starts a song that starts another chain of events?

Now Jerry Jeff, the man who said "I can't get loose without my juice," is a longtime favorite. I've seen at least ten of his shows, including one or two where the boozy baritone ground to a soggy stop mid-set. But I couldn't forget the night at the old Kenny's Castaways uptown in New York City that he sang for three and a half hours and the crowd nearly tore the place apart when he quit, holding up a guitar down to three strings.

"I'm out of strings, folks," he said. "You should've got here earlier."

But Jesse Winchester in person, thin, intense, sometimes bursting into a laugh as suddenly as a telephone rings, was a first for me. A beautiful tenor voice, classy songs, good stylish nylon-string guitar playing. We said hello and soon ended up by ourselves with a trashcan full of ice cold beer when Jerry Jeff went on-stage.

R: Hey Jesse, I'd like to interview you for The Coop magazine.

J: Well, I don't know (The speech slows down, gets careful; the trace of a southern drawl sneaks in)

R: I think people might like to read about you, myself.

J: Why don't we just talk?

R: O.K. if I write it down?

J: Oh, I guess.

R: Fair enough. How about some background?
Where were you born, college, first guitar, all that.

J: (Pause) Memphis. May 1944. When I was 18 I went to Williams College.
I'm not from a very musical family, I guess. I first picked up a guitar when
I was twelve...played a ukulele when I was little...but my guitar was a Silvertone with a silver bar
pickup. Never had an acoustic til 10 yearslater.

R: Hey, I had one of those.

J: Yeah, it was a good first guitar.

R: Now Jesse, one of the things that's well known about you is you went to Canada during
the Vietnam war. How'd that come about?

J: (Long pause) We had some bands in college, and I graduated in 1966, then hung out and
played in some piano bars - I had piano lessons--for a few months. Then I got my draft notice
and left for Canada. So I came to Canada in 1967. I loved it right away--my first thought I had
was on the bus from the airport, listening to two women chatting first in English, then slipping
right into French like it was no big deal at all. I remember it was snowing.

R: Do you think that going to Canada has surfaced in your music?

J: What do you mean?

R: Do you find yourself going back to this choice you made, or drawing on it, in creating
your music?

J: I have given in to the temptation, I know. I'm not proud of that. I'm sorry for every reference to
it. I'm not sorry for doing it, but I'm sorry for being so personal. What it amounts to is bragging
and I regret that.

R: You really feel that way?

J: I feel that referring to it...trying to inject myself into the song...is not the idea.

R: So you try to keep away from personal statements?

J: Yeah. I'd rather it be so personal that it was universal. Not everybody in this world is a draft dodger, so any discussion of it is not universal.

R: Well, not everyone is a musician or a male or a female either. You think there's no way to deal with it as a universal theme?

J: There is, but you want to talk about things much more basic. I want to hear a song about a guy and his girl or a guy and his god. The rest of it--let's say a guy and his government..I don't want to hear it. That kind of stuff is gonna die in five years. Songs are supposed to last longer and be truer than that. It's important to say things you really mean, and political things are of the lowest order. I like songs that are commercial--tin pan alley, Harlan Howard, Dallas Frazier. Those are the greatest songwriters--by my standards--in the world.

R: Excuse me, but can you give me some titles?

J: Dallas Frazier wrote "Tell It Like It Is," "Alley Oop." Hit songs, songs everybody understands.

R: A few years ago you were touring with a band, then you went solo. Was that for business or musical reasons, do you think?

J: Both of those. I can't afford to pay a band. But there were lots of other reasons. I don't have the personality of a leader, I can't lead a band. And what I want to do doesn't have anything to do with notes.

R: I feel like asking you what you want to do.

J: (Long pause) I hate to answer that when someone's writing it down. It sounds so jive. But you want magic, you want time to stop for everybody... You don't need equipment or any material thing to make that happen... In fact, the less baggage you've got, the better chance you've got of making that happen.

R: Magic is an elusive concept. Do you need any personal discipline to have that?

J: Yeah, it involves having it not happen for you. You've got to be completely aware. You've got to make it happen for them, but for you it's work. That's the price you pay. You can't party.

(There's a chorus of cheers from the crowd below as Jerry Jeff yells out a huge "Yahoo.")

R: You don't like to get drunk when you play?

J: In the past it was terrible. Not now. I was havin' all the fun but nobody else was.

It's by the sweat of your brow now, you've got to get it. You can have a good time with your baby when it's Saturday night.

R: Is that an ascetic attitude?

J: No, it's realistic. It's the truth. I've seen a lot of people in the music business try to have it the other way ...try to party along with the audience...and it never seems to work. You've got to be aware and sing the notes in tune, You've got to have the magic yourself, but it's got to be good. They won't let you be bad, won't let you misbehave.

R: What songs last for you over the years?

J: The ones I really get a kick out of are the new ones. The old ones, well, I make myself live them again. You have to mean it when you sing a song you've sung 1000 times, you've got to listen and mean it. It's got to be real.

R: What's your situation with recording?

J: I'm still with Bearsville, though my last record was a couple of years ago.

R: Anything In the works?

J: Yeah, for a few months now I've built a studio in my attic, did all the electrical work, and it's done. I'm real proud of it. I'll be starting an album soon.

R: Mostly solo?

J: No, kind of country pop. I'm into commercial music myself.

R: Are you writing songs about a man and his god?

J: Yeah, I write some spiritual stuff. I don't know if they'd play it, but to me it's spiritual. If I say I believe in God but I'm not totally sure...I've never seen God...! want to say I believe but...maybe that doesn't make me a true Christian if I stick the but in, but that's the way it is for me. I'm right there with the whole thing 'bout Jesus, but Jesus never talked to me.

R: Do you pray?

J: Yeah, I guess so. "I'm like you, I really don't know...when the shit comes down, your baby gets sick, you say, Dear Lord please, and that's prayer. But what does that make me? The next minute I'll be cursin' and misbehavin'...I really don't know what category that puts me in.

R: Do you try to get there in music?

J: The ultimate for me would be to sing gospel...to mean it and believe it.
There's something about it that makes me want to get down on my knees.
Maybe some day....

Jerry Jeff has wound the crowd into a suitable frenzy and sent them packing as the backstage crew puts an end to our conversation. Then Jerry Jeff, Jesse, and I are out of the hall, waiting for rides, three adult white males with their yarns and their songs.

Jerry Jeff, the upstate New Yorker-turned-Texan, stands by his convertible, strumming his guitar and humming to the bright New Hampshire stars, having touched none of the trashcan full of beers in his dressing room. Well-paid for my fifteen minutes of singing, I grab a ride out into the countryside for a late-night reunion with some longtime friends.

And Jesse Winchester, slowly and softly, says goodnight to us all, then puts the pedal down for Montreal, somewhere at the far end of a long and lonesome stretch of interstate highway.