

Spotlight

by Mike Joyce

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"They say it's only the monstrous egos that can pull off the appearance of humility," says Jesse Winchester with a laugh so big and infectious that it seems almost alien to his otherwise gentle southern drawl.

Uncomfortable though it may be, humble is a word that's often been applied to Winchester, a soft-spoken singer and songwriter best known for writing finely drawn lyrics that powerfully evoke the South he grew up in, the South he fled in order to avoid being drafted during the Vietnam war. A South he's never returned to, not really.

Since 1967, when he left Tennessee for Montreal with no job prospects and not the slightest notion of becoming a songwriter, Winchester, 42, has been living in Canada, now home to his wife and three children as well. Although he's toured the United States frequently since amnesty was declared in 1977 (tomorrow he'll be at the Kennedy Center for a Songwriters Showcase hosted by Jonathan Edwards) he still calls Canada home.

He left Tennessee, he says, determined to become a Canadian, to make it a positive move toward a new life, and to hold up his end of the bargain.

"At the time, the rules of the game were that you could leave so long as you never came back," he explains. "That was the deal, and I was prepared to live up to that deal. Psychologically, I decided to put my roots down here in Montreal. By the time amnesty came I had a family and a mortgage and the whole shot . . . There was a large group of draft dodgers and deserters who worked hard for amnesty, but I was not one of them. I just didn't see it that way."

When he first arrived in Canada, Winchester found himself playing rhythm guitar "out in the sticks . . . going crazy in a world where nobody spoke English." Only too happy to move on, he began playing piano at various cafe's in Montreal, where he soon discovered that English-speaking audiences expected to hear original material. So he began trying his hand at writing songs and within a couple of years had composed some of his best, including "Yankee Lady," "Brand New Tennessee Waltz" and "Biloxi."

These and other tunes, with their gentle melodies and descriptive, sometimes melancholy lyrics, impressed Robbie Robertson of the Band so much that he helped Winchester land his first recording contract. His debut album in 1970 quickly established him as one of the most gifted songwriters on the scene.

A series of albums on the same label, Bearsville, followed for the next decade -- some quite good, some rather mediocre. Increasingly, Winchester says, he became disenchanted with the

recording process and working with outside producers who never quite managed to do his songs justice -- which is one of the reasons he hasn't released an album in five years.

Another is pressure, or the lack of it.

"I guess you could say both me and the record company went on a sabbatical," he says with a sigh. "There was no pressure on me to record, and I don't do anything, it seems, unless the pressure's on . . . I didn't really get excited about making a new album which he hopes will be out before Christmas until I decided to go out and do it on my own."

Winchester's return to recording, however, doesn't mean that he thinks the public's appetite for well-wrought songs written in a folk vein is any healthier than usual.

"I hear everybody around me saying that," he stresses, "but it always sounds uncomfortably to me like Artie Shaw saying the big bands are coming back. In every interview with Artie Shaw, or whoever it might be from that era, they're always saying that, and it's patently not true. I think my kind of music, whatever it is, is always going to be a marginal seller."

Of course, the same could be said of the blues and R&B music that Winchester listened to as a kid growing up on a series of Mississippi farms. He went through a long period of listening to nothing but black music, he recalls.

"It was almost sick. When Elvis dropped the ball, so to speak, I just tuned out white musicians, I guess right up until I got to Canada. There wasn't much black music here so I began to listen to more country and folk."

Those same influences -- blues, country and folk music -- are still very much evident in Winchester's music, perhaps even more so now that he performs solo, accompanying himself on guitar. Basically, though, he regards himself as an old fashioned pop tunesmith, someone who's always striving "to write the kind of songs the Drifters used to sing."

These days, though, there is an important difference: When Winchester sits down to write a song, he's not always alone. He recently began working with the popular Nashville writer Don Schlitz ("The Gambler"), an association that excites Winchester even as it intimidates him.

"It's been real good to go down there and write songs together . . . but I'm still not convinced it's my me'tier. Somebody else described it once as making love with somebody else in the room. There's a lot to that.