



JESSE WINCHESTER'S

Southern Nights

BY MARY ELLEN MOORE

Memphis in May.

Hordes of army worms have invaded suburbia, browning the lawns before they have a chance to green. The sun is already busy bleaching the other greenery and wilting the citizens – a mere prelude to the hot and sticky summer ahead. The citizens, when not trying to save their lawns from the hordes, whisper about the latest murders and muggings; in Memphis, there's always a murder to whisper about.

The whispers reach even Overton Square. The restaurant and shop-inundated stalking grounds of rich Memphians and bored tourists, the Square is no longer bustling with money-wielding crowds. Desperate merchants try one gimmick after another to bring back business.

So it is that a mammoth, inflated rubber rainbow straddles Madison Avenue at Overton Square.

Memphis in May, the rainbow declares.

As if it wasn't obvious enough.

And somewhere beyond that rainbow is the Ritz, once a porno-flick theater, now a music hall. Tonight, more than 800 people have brushed aside those warning whispers to pack the Ritz for a special reunion.

Jesse Winchester has returned.

Jesse had left Memphis ten years before, not knowing whether he would ever see the city, the South or even the country again. He'd headed toward Canada and away from the draft and the Vietnam War. He was one of thousands, but like the others, his reasons were his own.

"I sure do appreciate your making my homecoming to Memphis such a wonderful, warm evening." Jesse tells the crowd, an enthusiastic group of young people – some so young that Vietnam and draft evasion must surely be in historical terms, not a reality which they themselves have faced. To them, Jesse is a Memphis legend, maybe not as big as Elvis or Jerry Lee or Al Green, but there's still that potential. So they greet him with resounding cheers, ovation after ovation and a plethora of "Welcome Home, Jesse" t-shirts.

"Welcome home, Jesse."

Earlier, Jesse had told an interviewer he felt awkward when Americans greeted him this way. "I know they mean well," he said, "but my home is in Canada now."

The son of a prominent Tennessee family with roots going back to the founding of Memphis, Jesse is even related to Robert E. Lee. His late father hated World War II, became a Mississippi farmer until Jesse was 12, then moved to Memphis where he practiced law. Jesse went north, for his education, to Williams College in Massachusetts, where he graduated in 1966. In 1967, motivated by his draft notice, Jesse took a plane to Canada.

"The draft thing is just a completely personal thing to me," Jesse says now. "Some people believed in fighting and some didn't."

Rather than look at the move in negative terms – as running away – Jesse chose to look at it positively, as move toward something. And gradually, he came to regard Canada as his new home, becoming a citizen in 1973.

He developed his interest in music, and in 1969 was discovered by Robbie Robertson of the Band, who produced Jesse's first album, *Jesse Winchester*. The album was the first of several well-received by the critics and established the music that Jesse has become associated with – heartfelt songs about the Deep South, with a few references to the North. Despite the critical praise, however, the albums were not commercial successes, something which his record company blames on his inability to tour the states.

So now, with President Carter's pardon as a ticket back to the country, Jesse's waiting to see if his touring will – if not shoot him into the ranks of Elvis, et. al - at least give him the same success as own songs have given others, among them Jimmy Buffett, Joan Baez and Stoney Edwards.

Denials aside, there's something intensely personal, intensely Southern, in Jesse Winchester's music. His very personal songs – like "Delta Lady"* or "Mississippi, You're On My Mind" – evoke a sense of place without pandering to the sentimentality; a sense of loss without the cloying sweetness of manufactured heartbreak. In a word, *real* songs about *real* people – some of whom happen to be from the South.

So far, his stateside fans were giving him a warm welcome.

"I feel great about it," says Jesse in his very soft-spoken voice which – despite 10 years in Canada – still retains more than a touch of drawl. "I'm waiting for the roof to fall in."

No longer able to blame his inability to tour for the limited success of his records, Jesse and the record company are holding their breaths, and despite the initial success of the tour, even he admits that much of his attraction is the "Singing Draft Evader" label.

His determination to rid himself of the label makes him hesitant to talk about his draft evasion and the reasons he's finally allowed back. But he doesn't mind singing about it.

Tell me why you like Jimmy Carter

Why do you like Jimmy Carter?

Tell my why you like Jimmy Carter

Good God Almighty, tell me where to begin

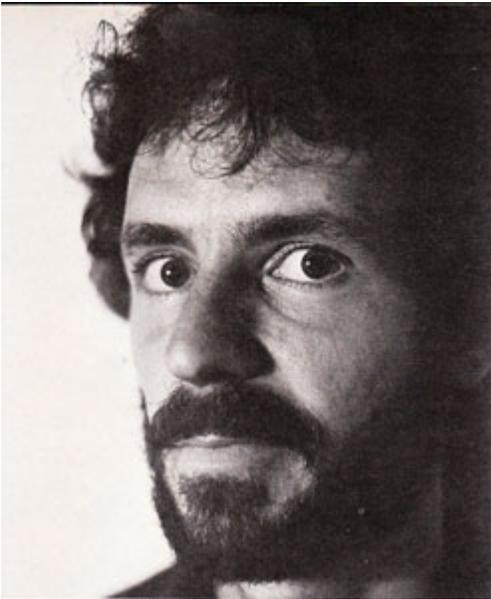
He tacked this simple thank you on to the traditional "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," a song he revived from the Depression and turned into an equally moving commentary on the '70s.

Politics aside, he doesn't mind talking about Canada as his home or Memphis, his former home.

"I love the South and I'm proud that I'm from it, proud that I have a little bit of Southern accent left ... well, I've lost quite a bit, I really have ... I still love Southern cooking the best. But I don't think that makes me any less a good Canadian. There's lots of Canadians who still cook their Ukrainian dishes or their Italian dishes and still are good Canadians. That's one of the beauties of Canada; there's room for you to maintain your traditional ties and still love your country.

"So no, I don't allow myself to regret anything or want things that I can't have."

Like anyone else who's been away for awhile, Jesse enjoys becoming reacquainted with his home town, despite the few surprises.



“What are all these *young kids* doing here?” was his first thought when he revisited his old high school. Christian Brothers, now in a new building. And, “They look at you and say ‘You mean you went to the *old school*? like it was 1890 or something,” Jesse laughs.

His wife Leslie, whom he met and married in Canada, and their two children got the full tour, too, although Jesse admitted that the kids were too young to understand his commentaries ...”See that, that’s where your Daddy went to school when he was your age.”

He grimaces at thought of what’s happening to Beal Street, once the center of Southern music, now boarded up and awaiting urban renewal.

“All good North American music has been heavily influenced by Southern music. Blues and country music are just about the foundation of everything. Jazz started here, Southern music ... everybody’s familiar with it, no matter where they live.”

Memories aside, Memphis is just another gig, except “I may clean up the act a little for Mom,” Jesse smiles. His mother, her friends and his, showed up for the first show at the Ritz and Jesse, whether nervous because of “Mom,” or the pressure of “Homecoming” or whatever, did a straight show, not in-between song banter, no sill patter, just one song right into the next.

Unlike a recent New York audience who, although enthusiastic, was more *controlled*, the Memphis audience showed a true recognition of where his songs were coming from. They yelled in all the right places, gave standing ovations to all the right songs and wouldn’t let him off the stage.

“Mississippi, You’re On My Mind,” that heart-breaking, realistic portrait of Mississippi earned an ovation, when the New York audience – and critics – had simply overlooked it.

Obviously Jesse was playing to his own people.

Unfortunately, the entire South is not yet aware of what it has spawned. He was forced to cancel a date in Knoxville, because of poor ticket sales, couldn’t even set up a date in Nashville where he’s a legend among the numerous songwriters, and Atlanta, his first southern date, was disappointing.

“Atlanta,” he mused. “The people don’t know about me. It’s the first place we’ve been that wasn’t really sold out, which is kind of disappointing. I’d kinda hoped Atlanta would be sold out. The audience was very receptive, warm, and I think next time it will be sold out.”

Next time.

Jesse and his band have already begun the endless circle of touring ... north, south, out west, rest a few weeks, then north, south....

Does he think the contact with the States will change his music in any way?

"I don't know. In the last year, however, I've undergone a sort of personal change in my life, and I would expect that would show up in my music. This is really completely apart from the amnesty. This happened before the amnesty was dreamed of.

"Ummmm, I just kinda got happy," he grins widely. "There's an old "Love American Style" episode I remember seeing with Mel Tillis in it starring as a country singer who couldn't write his songs unless he was miserable, so his manager, agents, everybody conspired to make him miserable so he could keep writing hits. I hope that's not the case with me.

"I don't know what stepped in. I tend to put things in religious terms, and suppose that I kinda got religion, but I don't want to belabor that or make a big thing about it – at least not in public. I just sorta decided that I wanted to give up everything that getting in the way of music, getting in the way of my putting on the *best* show, writing the *best* song that I possibly could. So I just put everything aside that was distracting to me and it just made me like myself a lot more, and it just made me ... very happy."

With a new outlook and an open door, Jesse's waiting to see what happens. His initial entry is history, and he hasn't made any other big splashes, but that doesn't mean he's not going to.

And until it does, he still has those memories of a hot but happy Memphis welcoming him "home" to keep him warm on those cold Canadian nights.



** this 1977 article mistakenly gives Jesse credit for writing "Delta Lady" which was actually written by Leon Russell.*