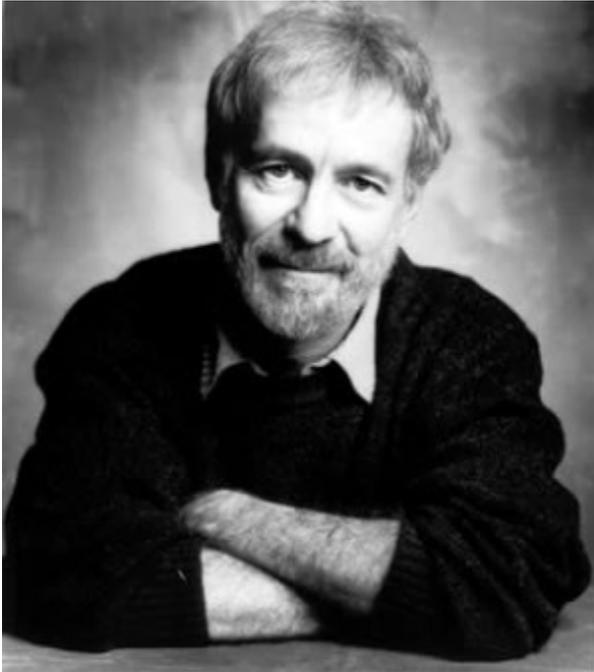


The Long Road Home



Jesse Winchester never set out to be a songwriter. When he was awarded an ASCAP Lifetime Achievement Award for his work in 2007, he was surprised and flattered. “I can’t account for it,” he says with his slight Southern drawl. “It’s the first time I’ve gotten an award, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. When I started out playing guitar, I never thought about being a songwriter. I wanted to be like Steve Cropper, a guitar player in an R&B band with good enough chops to make the singer I was backing up sound good.”

Winchester’s eponymous first album, released in the US on the tiny Ampex label in 1970, came out of nowhere, and included three of his much-covered signature tunes: “Yankee Lady”, a hit for Brewer and Shipley, “The Brand New Tennessee Waltz”, covered by Joan Baez and Patti Page, and “Biloxi”, which became a Jimmy Buffett concert staple. *Jesse Winchester* was produced by Robbie Robertson, which gave the songwriter immediate cachet and made him as famous for resisting the draft as for his music. (Winchester moved to Canada in 1967 to avoid the Vietnam war, but more on that later.)

The record was praised for Winchester’s laid-back vocals, gorgeous melodies, and insightful lyrics. His low-key style blended soul, rockabilly, gospel, folk, R&B, and a hint of Latin music that was perfect for the dawning era of pop singer-songwriters. He’s released 10 albums since then, including his current offering, *Love Filling Station* (Appleseed), but his reputation as a songwriter is assured. In the ’90s, he began pitching tunes to country artists and scored with “You Remember Me”, which Reba McEntire included on her multi-platinum album, *Rumor Has It*, in 1990, “Let’s Make a Baby King”, which Wynonna Judd cut on *Tell My Why* in 1993, and “O What a Thrill”, a hit for the Mavericks in 1994. He didn’t like touring, so the royalties allowed him to live comfortably and write the kind of songs he wanted to write.

Winchester, who is not related to the man who invented the famous rifle, grew up in the South on a series of farms in Mississippi, “but I never chopped cotton,” he says. “I tended to the cows now and then, but I had a comfortable, middle-class life. My first musical training was 10 years of piano lessons, which I’m glad I had, because I learned theory and

how to read music, but I didn't enjoy them. Later—when I listened to Ray Charles and Chuck Berry on the radio—is when the music started to click. When I heard 'What'd I Say' for the first time, I couldn't believe it. How could somebody make music that made me feel so good? I had heard black gospel music, because all our neighbors were black, but ['What'd I Say'] was far from anything I'd heard in church. It was an epiphany."

Winchester's teen years were spent in Memphis. He grew up playing organ in a Roman Catholic Church, and was familiar with gospel music, but says the hint of gospel in his own songs comes more from rock 'n' roll radio than from the church. "I wish the Catholics would get over themselves and adopt the Baptist songbook, or at least go back to Gregorian chant, which is beautiful. I'd go to church every day of the week if the music was that good. The gospel I picked up was from listening to Dewey Phillips over WHBQ in Memphis. He had a show called "Red, Hot and Blue" and was one of the first DJs to play white and black music without distinction. He'd play rhythm and blues, country music, boogie-woogie, gospel, and jazz and had an audience of white and black kids. I was young, but it made an impact.

"I kept up my straight musical activities in high school and played in rock bands. It never occurred to me to write songs, although I do remember looking at the labels of Elvis' records and noticing there was a name under the songs in parentheses. A guy named Otis Blackwell. I'm sure if he'd come in the door, no one would have known him, but seeing his name under 'Don't Be Cruel', 'All Shook Up', and 'Great Balls of Fire' impressed me."

Winchester studied English and philosophy in college and spent a year in Europe to study German. "I'm not a great student or a scholar," Winchester says thoughtfully. "I stayed in school to stay out of Vietnam and I had to pick a major, and although I'd taken a lot of French, German fascinated me. I was just wandering around academically; I didn't know what the heck I was doing. The German I did learn I picked up playing in a German R&B cover band called the Night Sounds. I played electric lead guitar. I was the only American in the band. If I'd only gone to school, I never would have learned the language. We played for a while in France, where I became a big fan of [Charles] Aznavour and [Edith] Piaf, but I didn't learn how to speak French properly until I played in a bar band in Quebec."

Winchester landed in Quebec after he left the US in 1967 to avoid the Army and the jungles of Vietnam. For many years, he was most famous as a draft resister, and even today, most articles about him usually lean heavily on his "draft dodger" past. When asked if he's tired of being grilled about the '60s and Vietnam, he laughs. "Journalists have to have a hook to hang their story on, that's natural. If I hadn't left the country back then, I'd only be another guy with a guitar, so I understand. I've made my bed and I'm happy to lie in it. I was so mad about [Vietnam] back then; I could hardly talk about it. Since I'm not a pacifist, I couldn't use that argument with the draft board, so I left the country." When Winchester left, there was no organization of draft resisters, so his journey was undertaken on his own. "My dad was already dead, so I told my mother and consulted with an old family friend before I left, but I was on my own.

"To get landed immigrant status, you had to have a job offer and playing in a band wouldn't fit the bill. I looked for a job as a journalist, but my French wasn't good enough. There was a loose support system [for draft resisters] taking shape in Montreal and someone found me a professor who gave me a faux job teaching German. He was a complete stranger to me, but still lent me 500 dollars in cash to carry across the border to prove I had money. The conservatives have the idea that the hippies and youth were all about self-gratification—sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll—but the people then were very moral and principled and had a strong sense of right and wrong. That professor told me that one day I'd pass on my good fortune to someone else. The faith people had back then was kind of amazing."

After landing in Montreal, Winchester played in various R&B cover bands and toured heavily, making good money when he actually got paid. The singer-songwriter movement took off in 1969 and he found he could get gigs closer to home in coffeehouses with just his acoustic guitar. “The money was good, you actually got paid, and they expected you to write your own songs, so I did. Up to that point, I’d never thought about writing songs, but I did and I produced ’em a lot quicker than I do now. But to be fair, there was a lot of dross in my work. I have drawers of dross.”

Winchester’s work was part of a big shift in popular music, moving away from commercial entertainment and toward a more honest mode of self-expression, but he hesitates to define himself as an artist with a capital A. “There is a difference between what I do and what came before, but I’m not sure how accurate my self-knowledge is. I like to think I’m on the entertainment end of the spectrum. First, you have to entertain; if something deeper is there for those who want to dig, that’s fine. But if you don’t entertain them, then you’re wasting everybody’s time, including your own.”

Until recently, Winchester considered his albums glorified demos. “I’m a very, very strict editor,” he explains. “I sing things over and over again before I record them and keep removing stuff. The process is kinda long and how it works for me, I just don’t know. Making records isn’t my strong suit. I’m a better live entertainer than a recording artist, and while I used to find touring aggravating, I’m getting better at it.

“I’m not an outgoing person and making records involves paying lip service to the commercial end of the thing. There is a conflict between commerce and music, but I’m in the fortunate position of not being too popular. Those who want to work with me—other musicians and labels—seek me out. The others know they won’t get rich with me and don’t come around.”

One company that came around was Appleseed Recordings, a small radical folk label that’s put out music by other icons like Pete Seeger, Donovan, and Tom Rush. “I didn’t know them, but they gave us a decent budget [for *Love Filling Station*] and it worked out well.”

The songs on *Love Filling Station* have a nostalgic late-’50s early-’60s feel, sentimental without wallowing in the imagined perfection of the past. “O What a Thrill”, Winchester’s hit for the Mavericks, gets a laid-back Latin take, and “Wear Me Out”, a sly, sexy song, drops a bit of New Orleans strut into the mix. The ’60s influence is most noticeable on “Stand By Me”, a cover of the Ben E. King hit with its understated vocal, “Sham-A-Ling-Dong-Ding”, an achingly beautiful song about the push and pull of young passion on the cusp of sexual awakening, and “I’m Gonna Miss You Girl”, a tune that brings to mind the Drifters. There’s also some Texas swing. “Lonely for a While”, which sounds like a ’40s standard, is a solid country tune, and “Far Side Bank of Jordan” is a cover that conflates love, heaven, and the afterlife. Has reaching his mid-60s made Winchester more aware of mortality? “I think about mortality, but I’m not in a place where I want to write about it,” Winchester replies. “I think I wrote about it more in my youth. The nice thing about ‘Far Side Bank of Jordan’ is that it’s a love song and a gospel song, with a neat little twist.



“On this record, the idea was to make a virtue of necessity. Not having a whole lot of money, I wanted something acoustic because it’s cheaper and faster. I play with good guys who learn fast and do everything in one or two takes. I’ve worked with Bil [VornDick, the

producer] a lot over the years and he supplies a calm atmosphere, enthusiasm and cheerfulness, and makes everything sound good. It's hard when you're singing to hear your own clinkers and bad notes. Bil started as Marty Robbins' sound man and he has great technical chops and his musical talent makes the process better for everybody.

"I know what I want going in and almost never get it. I walk away thinking what I heard was 'dum diddy dum' not 'dum diddy dum.' Someone told me about Elvis' recording method after he came back from the Army and Col. Parker had him singing all those horrible movie songs. He'd sit and listen to a take 'til he liked it, surrounded by all his sycophants. So Elvis has become a verb for me. I sit there and Elvisize the takes. If you live with anything long enough, you get to like it. I guess that can apply almost to your whole life."

So was the '50s and '60s doo-wop-meets-R&B feel of the album by design or by chance? "Maybe both. I get inspired by different people every time I write, which is to say, I steal from different people. Right now, I like Vern Gosdin and his partner, Max D. Barnes. They wrote country songs in the old-fashioned way. The songs were almost bluegrass with a flexible meter. They're not careful with making it eight or 16 bars; they write nine or 11 bars, with maybe a pause for the singer to take a breath and go back to it. It keeps the listener off balance and I like that. Elaborate chord changes distract me. I'm happy with 'three chords and the truth,' as Harlan Howard said. The chord changes are not the point for me.

"I play almost every day, and every now and then, an idea comes from who knows where? Then you elaborate on that seed; the attitude and groove is all in that little thing. From there, it's craft more than art. Make sure it scans and that the feel stays consistent. You do that consciously, combining unconscious impulses and conscious refinement. I'm always editing. Some [songs] don't ever get done, even when they're recorded. Old ones change, but not too much, 'cause I want the listeners to recognize them. When I go to shows and see artists changing the songs too much, it annoys me. But if a note sounds better than what's on the record, I'll change it."

In recent years, Winchester has done more touring, usually just himself and a guitar, and after almost 40 years in Canada, he recently moved back to the States. "I had a good life in Canada, but I met my wife Cindy, and she lived in Memphis. I couldn't bring myself to ask her to move to Quebec and learn French, so I moved back to Memphis. We actually went to the same high school years back, although I didn't know her then. My first high school girlfriend introduced us. About two years ago, we moved to Charlottesville, near the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson's baby."

Was there any culture shock after living so long in Canada? "Yes and no," Winchester concludes. "Trying to get house insurance for the first time in my life was no fun and I miss the bread in Quebec. I did eventually find a place in town to get good baguettes and regular French bread. It amazes me that the richest country in the world can't do something as important as make a good loaf of bread."