

The sound of the South has resonated in Jesse Winchester's music, from his first recording in 1970 to his most recent 1999 release. Sometimes it's through explicit geographical references such as "Biloxi" or "Talk Memphis," on others it's in the background of R&B grooves on "Sweet Little Shoe" or the taste of gospel in "That's What Makes You Strong." That feeling for place is perhaps part of the reason respected folk and country artists, including Reba McEntire, Emmylou Harris, Michael Martin Murphey, Mollie O'Brien, and Chris Smither, have chosen to record his songs.

"I still consider myself culturally a Southerner," said Winchester, who has lived in Canada since 1967. "I love the emotionalism of Southerners. Northerners seem to be more intellectual somehow, and Southerners are more from the heart. I like that. I like sentimental things, romantic things, and I think that affects my music. I still prefer Southern cooking," he added, "and I still say y'all to people."

He was born in Louisiana and spent his early childhood on his father's farms in Mississippi and Tennessee. Though Winchester's father, James, was expected to join the family law firm when he

finished his military service, he decided to work the land instead. "He was a hippie 25 years before his time," Winchester remarked in a 1994 interview. When Winchester was a young teenager, his father had to give up the heavy labor of farm work and moved his family to Memphis. The young Winchester loved the sounds that were coming over the radio. "R&B, country, and gospel," he recalled. "I listened to the same things everybody else in my age group, in the place where I lived, was listening to. And I loved all of it."

The Winchesters traditionally made careers in the military and in law, so Jesse did not grow up planning to play music for a living, although he did study piano and taught himself to play guitar. "I studied piano all through grade school and high school, and I was always in a band with my friends, and I played organ in church, so I had a bit of formal music education," he said. "They taught me how to read music, and theory, and things like that." But he didn't have a major career plan. "I really don't know what I was thinking, just putting one foot in front of the other, you know. At the beginning of every school year my father would say it's fine for you to take music lessons, but I don't want you ever to become a professional musician. I just said, 'Yeah, yeah – no problem,'" he reflected, "but really, looking back, I always wanted to play guitar in an R&B band. And that did sort of come true eventually."

Winchester went on to study philosophy in New England and in Germany after high school, and then returned to Memphis where he got a job playing piano in a cocktail lounge while he considered his career direction. Then his draft notice came. It was 1967 and the height of the Vietnam era, and Winchester decided to move to Canada rather than serve in the war.

"I looked in the encyclopedia under Canada," he told Colin Escott in an interview for the liner notes of the reissue of his first album, *Jesse Winchester*, in 1994. "It said that Montreal was the largest city in Canada, which it was then, and the second largest French speaking city in the world. I had been in Europe for a while, and I liked living with a different language, so that appealed to me. That's how clumsy my reasoning was."

It was the move north that sealed his decision to find work in music. "When I came up here in 1967, to Montreal, I tried to get a regular straight job, but my poor French held me back. I was kind of forced to get a job in music, and one thing led to another. I played in several bar bands, touring Quebec and Ontario. I guess the final straw with that came when we were way way up in northern Quebec, playing a place so far north that it's actually the end of the highway. If you want to go any further you have to get into an airplane," he said. "We were all the way up there, and the promoter ran away with all the money from the show, so we had to scrape up gas money to make it back to Montreal."



"I said that's the end of it, I can't take any more of this. I was tired of playing out in the provinces anyway, little places where there were no bookstores, no nothin' really, just watching hockey on television, and I didn't understand the rules...it was drivin' me crazy. So I said, I'm gonna play solo, I'll go play in restaurants, song like "The Shadow Of Your Smile" and stuff like that," Winchester said.



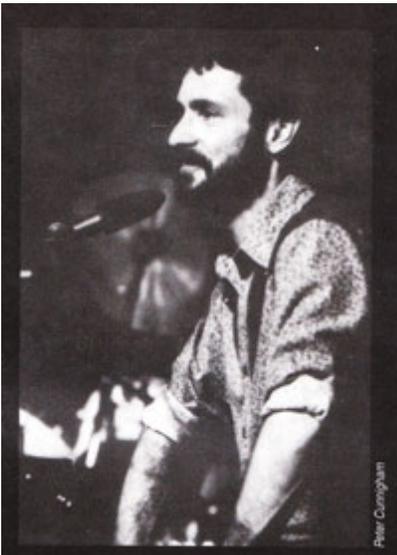
Jesse Winchester and babe, 1972

Eventually he got a gig at a coffeehouse. "There were these, you know, folk musicians playing there, and you were sort of expected to write your own songs. So at that point I started writing," he said. Soon Winchester began to make a name for himself in the Montreal music community and was headlining shows rather than opening them. A friend of a friend introduced Winchester to Robbie Robertson of the Band. "They had just released *Music From Big Pink*, their first big record. I was very impressed by it, so I was delighted to meet him," the songwriter recalled. Robertson liked Winchester's songs and offered to produce his first album. Drummer Levon Helm from the Band, Canadian guitarist David Rea, and old-time fiddler Al Cherny worked on the recording, which was engineered by Todd Rundgren. The self-titled disc, released by Bearsville Records in 1970, contained songs with themes and musical grooves that Winchester would mine over the years, including reflections of Southern places and emotions, in "Biloxi" and "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," R&B-flavored style in "The Nudge," a bitter-sweet take on love in "Yankee Lady," understated humor in "That's A Touch I Like," and spiritual investigations in "Quiet About It."

Winchester's composing process is informal. "Oh, I just start to play, sit around and play until something sounds good. Little bits and pieces of ideas come to me, and if I like one I'll flesh it out. I wish I had a method I could rely on," he said, "but there doesn't seem to be any technique, or any rules, which is kind of scary – you never know when it's going to stop." He has a small studio outside his house in the countryside outside Montreal. "I'll just go sit out there and play. I try to keep to a schedule, but there are days to do business ... and then I spent the whole day yesterday doing housework," Winchester said, laughing.

What kind of music does the songwriter himself listen to these days? "Well, I live out in the middle of nowhere, and there's only one radio station we can get out here, up in New Hampshire, so it's mostly country that I listen to, and I really like it. We can't get any gospel up here except on Sunday mornings, and then it's really slick, produced stuff, not the more basic stuff that I like." He reads widely. "I like history. I'm a devotee of P.G. Wodehouse. Evelyn Waugh's not bad, maybe a darker Wodehouse. I like good popular writing, like Elmore Leonard, Carl Hiaasen, Patricia Highsmith," he commented.

At the time that first record was made, Robbie Robertson gave a tape of Winchester's music to his manager, Albert Grossman, a top music industry player at the time. "And from that point on I had a recording career, such as it's been," Winchester said. Performing was more problematic. Winchester wasn't able to play in the United States until President Jimmy Carter declared an amnesty for draft evaders in 1977. He kept an active performing schedule in Canada and soon was working the folk and country circuit in the U.S., as well, though by the time he was able to tour in the U.S., the height of the singer/songwriter popularity boom had begun to fade. He recorded a series of impressive albums in the mid-70s, including *Third Down*, *110 To Go*, *Let The Rough Side Drag*, and *A Touch On The Rainy Side*. He had a top 40 hit with "Say What" in 1981, and covers of his songs began climbing in the charts, as well, including "I'm Gonna Miss You Girl," which became a top 10 country hit for Michael Martin Murphey, "Rhuma Girl," which went up the pop charts as recorded by Nicollette Larsen, and "Well-A-Wiggy," which charted for the Weather Girls as and R&B hit. Emmylou Harris, Joan Baez, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Jimmy Buffett also recorded Winchester's songs.



Jesse Winchester in the studio, 1977

Looking at this development, Winchester realized, “Most of my income was writing songs for other people,” and by the release of his 1988 disc *Humour Me*, “I was tired. I just got tired of the touring and performing and recording. I took stock and decided to concentrate on writing songs for other people.” Country artists quickly found a ready source of material in Winchester’s songbag. “Reba McEntire made a lot of money for me. I picked a couple of cuts on Wynonna’s album. Emmylou Harris did some of my tunes too.”

Between these cuts and covers by The Everly Brothers, Elvis Costello, Waylon Jennings, and Bonnie Rait, “I made enough money to keep myself going and make my alimony payments,” Winchester said.

As the years went by, though, the urge to record and perform his own material began to grow again. “I had a change a couple of years ago – I became single again, and then I had kind of a personal change coming out of that, and now I seem to enjoy

things a lot more,” he commented “I’m having the time of my life performing this time around.” As for his current recording, he reflected, “I just felt I should do it. Even from a financial standpoint, even though my records have not sold a lot, they’ve always functioned as glorified demos. So from that point of view, it made some sense for me to get back into the studio.” Winchester got in touch with Barry Poss of Sugar Hill, who connected him with producer Jerry Douglas. The project *Gentleman of Leisure*, was recorded in Nashville. “I had a wonderful time,” Winchester remarked. “In addition to being a sublime player, Jerry Douglas is a good leader, too – not in a heavy handed way, but with a lot of good fun, good humor. Also, he can plan and organize to save money. He knows how to get the most out of a dollar, which is important when you’re coming in with budget like I’m bringing!” Pleased with the whole recording experience, Winchester said that one thing he learned from the project was “that I don’t want to wait so long between doing records – I want to do another one.”

If you look up Jesse Winchester in most of the popular guides to popular music today, you’ll find that the entries first identify him as “America’s most well-known draft dodger,” and many commentators go on to discuss the importance of the themes of exile as a subtext to Winchester’s work. “I can’t see that myself,” he said, “I don’t know where they’re getting that from.” A prolific songwriter and composer who continues to find fresh ways to express his ideas about themes that interest him, Winchester pointed out that politics isn’t one of them. “I’m not a political person. I mean I love politics, it’s a great game and I sit and curse at the people I don’t like, but no more than anybody else.” As for his decision to move to Canada, “I’m certainly always willing to talk about it, it’s no secret and I’m not ashamed of it or any of that, but if I could just drop the subject I’d love to. I certainly don’t want to limit what I write by making it political,” he said. “I’m more interested in writing about the relationship between men and women, and with God – these are issues that include politics, but they’re much bigger to me.”

Jesse Winchester Selected Discography

Gentleman of Leisure

Sugar Hill (1999)

The Best of Jesse Winchester

Rhino (1989)

Humor Me

Sugar Hill (1988)

Talk Memphis

Stony Plain (1981)

A Touch on the Rainy Side

Stony Plain (1978)

Nothing but a Breeze

Stony Plain (1977)

Third Down 110 to Go

Bearsville (1972)

Jesse Winchester

Bearsville (1970, reissue Stony Plain 1994)