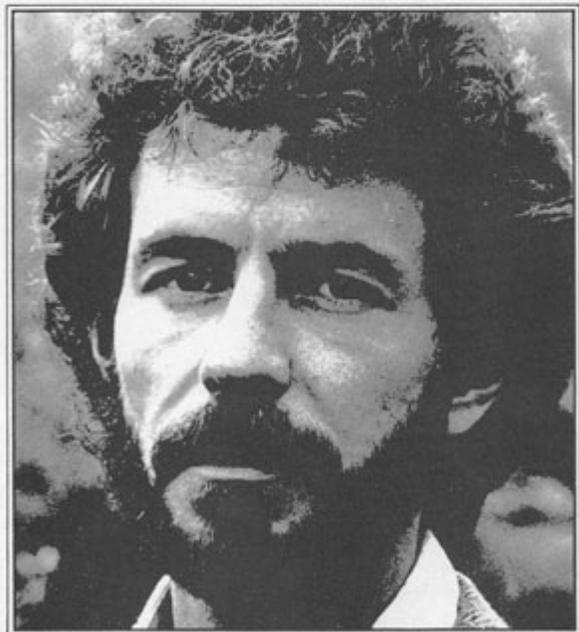


THE RETURN OF JESSE WINCHESTER

by Rory O'Connor



Photos by Carolyn Bates

A little over a decade ago – on January 6, 1967, to be precise – a 22-year old Williams College graduate left his home town of Memphis by plane. He carried a suitcase, an electric guitar and \$200. He left four days before he was scheduled to be inducted into the United States Army to help fight an idiotic war being waged half a planet away, against a yellow people with whom he had no quarrel. When the immigration officials in Montreal asked him how long he was planning to stay, he answered “Forever.”

Last week Canadian citizen Jesse Winchester was back, sitting on a mountaintop near Woodstock, New York, still carrying his electric guitar. Slight of build yet lithe and well-muscled, he wears the same full dark beard and short brown hair he had ten years ago. He speaks with the same pronounced Southern accent. But he no longer resembles the gaunt, hollow-eyed draft victim who appeared on the jacket of his first album. His face has filled out somewhat, and his eyes have lost some of their apocalyptic fervor. Winchester’s first visit across the border since his pardon was on March 11, when he came home to Memphis to visit relatives. Now he was here again, with his band, on business. He used his years in exile well: honing his musicianship, writing songs and recording four albums

that have gained him a reputation within the music world as one of “our” most brilliant singer-songwriters. He was discovered in 1969 by Robbie Robertson of The Band, who produced his first album. Since then his songs have been recorded by stars from Wilson Pickett to Joan Baez, and he numbers as his fans the likes of the Eagles, Jackson Browne and Bob Dylan, who dedicated one of the Rolling Thunder concerts to him.

But living in Canada has meant superstardom has so far eluded Winchester. Now his return will change all that. He and his band went to the country estate *cum* rehearsal facilities of Albert Grossman, the pony-tailed president of Bearsville Records, the company Winchester records for. There they prepared for his current national tour, which started with the April 21 concert at Burlington, Vermont, just over the border from Abercorn, Quebec, where Winchester had played to enthusiastic Vermonters several times during his exile.

Part of that enthusiasm, and part of the enthusiasm greeting his tour, comes from his music. And part – a significant part – comes from his symbolic role. There are those who try to paint him as the conscience of America, and it makes him uncomfortable.

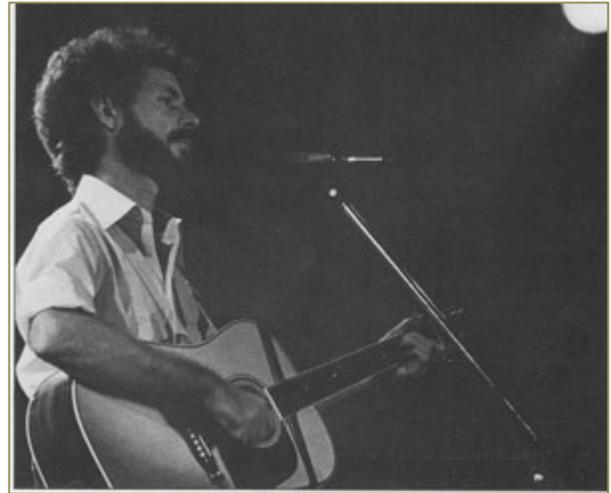
“I know that what people are most interested in writing about is the draft-dodging aspect of this,” he says, resigned to what’s coming as we begin to talk. “That’s okay. I did it and I’ll talk about it. But I never said I was any ‘conscience of America.’ I just play music – and do the best I can.”

Fortunately, his best is very good. Because when he stops playing music and begins to discuss his politics, he is bored – although unflinchingly polite – and his answers are hardly those one would expect from a man who will surely be accused of exploiting his exile.

Does he resent what the government did to him? All the lost years? The time he was forced to spend away from his family, his friends, his audience...

“Resentment can only poison your own system,” he interrupts. “It’s a pretty worthless feeling.”

I wonder what he felt when he had faced being drafted.



“I just didn’t want to discuss it with them, you know?” he responds. “I wasn’t really political at all, but I had a feeling that the people with the morale and belief and integrity on their side were right. But I had no facts and figures. I mean, I didn’t even become aware there was a place called Vietnam until ’63 or ’64. I wasn’t on the Viet Cong’s side; it was more like ‘Leave me out of this, fellas.’ It offended me that people above me could decide whom I kill and what my life is worth.”

Did he become political *after* being forced out of the country?

“I didn’t really get too involved with the Movement in Montreal. They seemed to be going in a different direction from me – working toward amnesty, formulating issues, etc. – but to me the idea was to become a good Canadian. The idea was, if you came up here you could *never* go back,” he says, sounding like a fundamentalist minister calling down fire and brimstone. “I never thought in a million years that they would let us come back.”

Why did the United States government change its mind?

“I don’t rightly know,” he answers softly after a thoughtful pause. “Maybe it just turned out that we were their kids, is what it amounted to. Or else the neighbor’s.”

“I don’t think there was anybody with evil intentions,” he continues, looking me straight in the eye. “A war is like a storm; there’s nobody to blame, and everybody gets hurt. You’ve just got to do the best you can.”

No, this is not the anti-war conscience of America speaking. But there *is* something austerely romantic about him that makes the mantle fit even if the words do not. He distains “foolishness” such as drinking (which he gave up a year ago) and smoking marijuana (which he supposedly gave up a month ago). He has a quaint, militaristic air, intense discipline and born-again belief in absolutes that feels a lot like that of his fellow Southerner Jimmy Carter. Not surprisingly, and apart from the pardon, Winchester senses an affinity with Carter.

“I think some real good things are happening in the U.S. today,” he begins, warming to the subject. “People are getting interested in things like honesty, ethics and morality. Jimmy Carter is a good symbol of all that. The people wanted someone who *believes* in something, I think. You can’t bring change overnight, but there are certain signs. Like the energy crisis can be a good thing, if it makes people aware of what they’re doing.”

It was not until we got off politics completely and on to music that Winchester began to relax. We talked about the music on his latest (and best) album, *Nothing But A Breeze*, which was released coincident with the tour. Besides seven excellent new compositions of his own, the album features an old Stoney Edwards tune called “Seems Like Only Yesterday”; “It Takes A Young Girl,” which Winchester describes as “a song I first heard done by B.B. King and which I slowed up”; and the haunting old Everly Brothers number called “Bowling Green.”

Like his previous albums, *Nothing But A Breeze* is a mixture of good-timey shuffles and slow, evocative ballads. The themes, too, are consistent: love lost and gained, the glory and beauty of the commonplace, the simple realities and visions of life in the southern United States. As always, the lyrics are filtered through a maze of whimsy, Biblical allusions and indirect rhyme schemes. Atop it all rides Winchester’s silky, rich voice, alternatively plaintive and playful.

Beneath it, the emotion is always there. When the exile sings even an ordinary lyric like the chorus to “Bowling Green” – “A man down in Kentucky / Well he sure is lucky / Just to live down in Bowling Green” – the song becomes infused with meaning and supercharged with emotion. Part of it is the power of his voice, and part of it Winchester’s realization that what is left out can lend as much to a song as what is put in. One gets the impression of a man equally aware of what goes on within and without him, an aesthete, a romantic with a classical bent toward strict structure and economy of style, and a musician at the peak of his art, who understands silence is often the better half of sound.

That last element is reflected in his demeanor as well. He is probably the most consistently and sincerely polite person I have ever met. He treats everyone who enters his life in the same respectful manner. So it is with respect and a good deal of apology that he refuses my post-interview request to sit in on a rehearsal.

“I’m sorry, but the rehearsals are closed,” he tells me firmly. “I’m not trying to play at superstar or anything. It’s just that if there are people there, like a writer or someone I know, I find myself playing to that person instead of practicing and trying to get it right. I don’t want to do that but I just can’t help it, I guess. I hope you understand. It’s nothing personal.”

I murmur that of course I understand, and begin gathering up my things.

“Where are you going now?” he asks me. “Maybe we can talk some more later on.”

I tell him that I don’t really know, since Bearsville is not exactly teeming with places to hang out for an afternoon. He pauses, then gestures for me to enter the big red rehearsal barn.

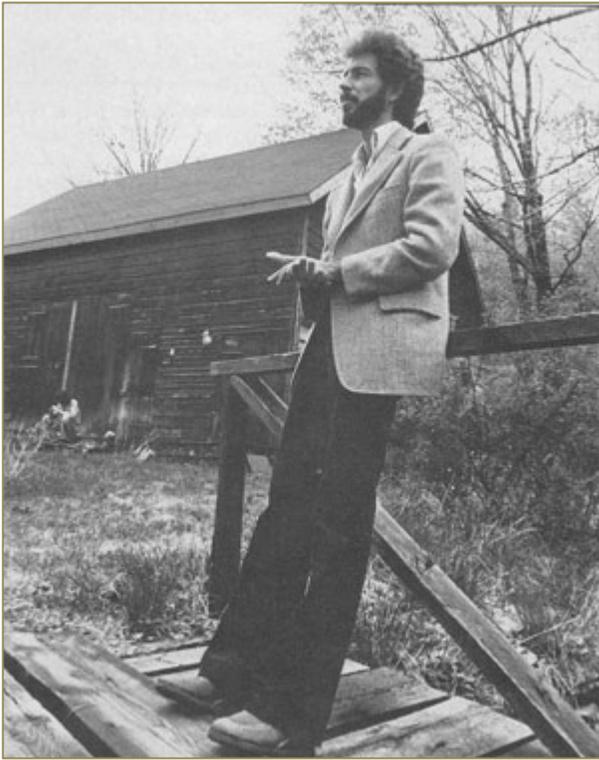
“You might as well come in and listen, then,” he smiles. “There really isn’t anything else to do around here.”

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Inside the barn stands the Midnight Bus. That’s the name of Winchester’s backup band, consisting of Marty Harris on bass, Bobby Cohen on lead guitar, Ron Dann on pedal steel and Dave Lewis on drums. The band is clad entirely in high school track shorts and little else.

“We’ve just emerged from the depths of a Canadian winter,” explains Harris, pointing to the bright blue sky outside.

There is the usual rock ‘n’ roll clutter of equipment, instruments and general debris strewn about the room. Winchester proceeds immediately to the piano over in the corner and sits down. To my surprise, everyone ignores him and continues to fool around as before. The band members, all



Canadian and all slightly younger than Winchester, are veterans. Gradually I comprehend that a certain amount of levity is probably necessary among men who have to spend so much time together on the road.

Soon everyone calms down and tunes up. Winchester motions and they slide magically into the opening notes of "You Remember Me," and intricate Dylanesque love/hate song from the new album.

*"They say no one should call on you
Unless he's your permission to
But me I just came anyway
I couldn't care less what you say."*

He stops and frets over the new ending that they have prepared for the song. He's concerned about a section where he has to suddenly switch from piano to organ without missing a note.

"I just don't know if I can hit that B flat on the Organizer without messing up the vocal," he tells drummer Dave Lewis, who suggests that the new ending may be superfluous after all. He tries again.

*"Tonight is our last night in town
So don't worry about me hanging around
Tomorrow night it's Calgary
And you'll be good and rid of me...."*

The maturity of Winchester's art is stunning. A few simple chords, a few simple words, and an infinite number of new worlds have been suggested.

The rehearsal continues apace, with the star still nervous and the band quickly getting practiced out. They've been playing most of these songs together in Canada for almost a year, and they are already anxious in anticipation of the first American concert two nights hence. Finally Winchester calls it a day, still looking tense. It's clear that the new album, the pardon and the pressures of getting ready for a major tour have been weighing heavily on him, and the media barrage that began with *People* magazine and NBC's *Weekend* has intensified as the first American concert nears. He thanks the band members for their patience and heads off to do yet another phone interview in preparation for his tour.

That night I eat dinner with Jesse and the band at the Bear Cafe, one of the two restaurants in Bearsville owned and operated by the omnipotent Albert Grossman, who also holds title to the rehearsal barns, a 24-track studio, two administrative buildings housing the headquarters of his record company, and a handful of houses for guests and employees. Grossman, who once managed Dylan, Joplin, The Band, Gordon Lightfoot and others of that stature, is an authentic heavy in the record industry. In between hobnobbing with John Sebastian and other celebrities eating in the Bear this evening, Grossman comes over to make sure everything is all right for Winchester.

Wearing a herringbone jacket and professorial glasses, Grossman looks more like a retiring classics teacher than a pop star manager. Winchester seems more relaxed now than this afternoon, perhaps

aided by the steady stream of banter and horseplay among the band members. Occasionally he joins in, much to their merriment. More often, however, he sits reserved and silent, with his gravity of expression only occasionally pierced by a boyish smile.

After an elegant meal, the talk turns to Thursday night and the concert. Winchester says he can never understand bands that are eager to take the stage or that resent a long set by the opening act. "They could play forever and I wouldn't mind," he smiles. "Or if the electricity was to black out, that would be fine too. I wouldn't mind at all; I'd just pack up my equipment and go home."

"It's just the initial moments, before any audience contact is made that freak me out," says Harris. "After that, everything's cool."

"The feeling reminds me of one I've had while hitchhiking," Winchester says. For a moment you can imagine his mind traveling some desolate reach in Manitoba or Saskatchewan. "Both feelings are the same; you've just been dropped off in the middle of nowhere and you suddenly ask yourself "Why, of all possible places in the universe, am I here right now? You know – panic. *What am I doing here?*"

He loses his smile and drifts off behind that severe front again, snapping out of it only to say goodbye to Eric Andersen's wife or to talk to Grossman during his sorties over to our table. It seems obvious he is brooding about Thursday night and everything it suggests and recalls. It's the beginning of a major U.S. tour, difficult enough in itself. But so much extra psychic baggage is coming along on this trip, this homecoming.

"The idea was, if you came up here you could *never* go back," he had said. He regarded his pardon as an act of mercy: "Justice would have said I could never come back, but, mercy allowed the pardon." What a strange figure he is, who didn't think there were any "evil intentions" behind the war that sent him into exile, and who believed it was "justice" that he couldn't return! A musician who says he'd just as soon pack up and go home without playing! But playing, not politics, is what he does.

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And playing well is what he did at the concert two nights later. Memorial Auditorium in Burlington is a lot smaller and less auspicious than it sounds, but looks like it might seat 2,500. It was jammed that night, what with Winchester's loyal legions and several hundred fans of Leon Redbone, the opening act.

Redbone was done, intermission was over and it was Jesse Winchester's moment, the moment to be standing just offstage asking himself once again, "*What am I doing here?*" The lights went low as Winchester's promoter and fellow Tennessean, Barry Bozman, walked to the microphone.

"You know, it just makes me so happy to be able to stand before you tonight," he begins. Thankfully, he decides to cut it short, and just says, "Ladies and gentlemen, some things have to be aged in fine wood, in casks for ten or twelve years. Will you welcome ... Jesse Winchester!"

The crowd erupts in applause as Winchester and his band take the stage at last. When he reaches the microphone and tries to speak, the applause grows even stronger, and the first few bunches of people are standing. Soon more and more clapping, whistling and cheering people are on their feet, until Jesse Winchester is tendered a three-minute standing ovation.

"Thank you very much," he says, ever polite, symbol and star.

The concert begins with the hard-rocking "Payday," with Winchester singing "I feel good, just like I knew I would," and smiling out at the crowd. He follows it up with the sprightly "Silly Heart" and then

what he describes as a “political song – maybe the only one we do,” entitled “Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt.” Jesse alters the lyric at one point and sings, “Tell me why you like Jimmy Carter... Good God A’mighty, tell me where to begin.”

He follows with “Bowling Green,” a rollicking band-participation number called, appropriately enough, “The Midnight Bus,” and then the title tune from the new album. Most of the audience has never heard it before. “Nothing But a Breeze” goes over just like one.

Winchester carefully controls the concert’s pace, switching between familiar old favorites and songs from the new album. “Twigs And Seeds,” a silly 1960s pro-dope song he says he just put out “because only recently did I give vent to a lot of foolishness and record it,” gets a particularly good reaction tonight.

Meanwhile, it becomes increasingly apparent that there are going to be sound problems all night. There is a constant hiss through the speakers that just won’t quit, but Winchester perseveres. He’s riding on top of some wave of his own, and nothing is going to bring him down.

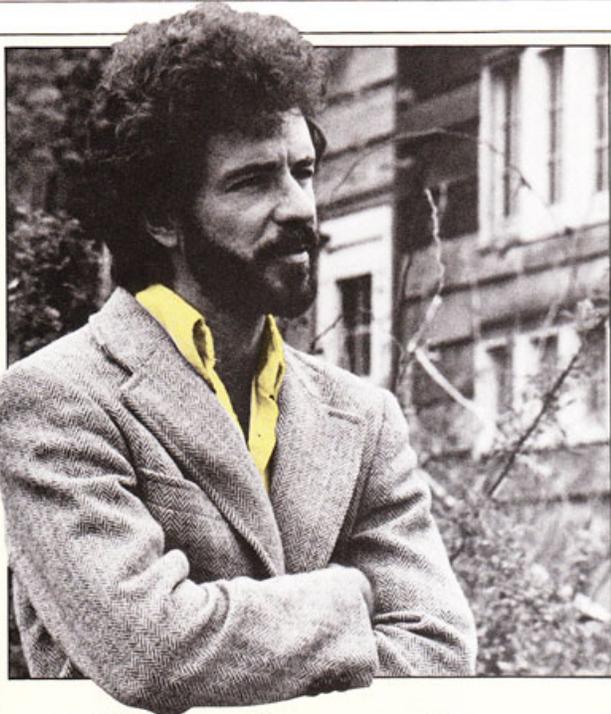
When he begins to sing “The Brand New Tennessee Waltz,” I wonder if I can detect a catch in his voice. Certainly there are more than a few enraptured faces around me that don’t seem far from tears, and to tell you the truth I’m not so sure about myself anymore either.

“At the brand new Tennessee Waltz,” sings Jesse, “there’s no telling who will be there.”

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*Rory O’Conner is the music editor of Boston’s The Real Paper, Where and earlier version of this article first appeared. He is currently working on a book about the rock world.*

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WHY JIMMY LET JESSE BACK IN

Reliable sources indicate that fellow Tennessean Barry Bozeman, promoter of the Burlington show, may also have figured in Jesse Winchester's return to this country.

Apparently Jimmy Carter did not originally intend to pardon draft evaders who had changed their citizenship, as Winchester did in 1973. But Bozeman, knowing The Georgia Peanut's fondness for pop music, put a few wheels in motion in an effort to change Carter's mind.

Here's how it worked: Bozeman initially contacted his old school friend Bill Owen, executive director of the Tennessee Democratic Party. The two then convinced Jim Free, Carter's Tennessee campaign manager, that the President-elect ought to consider Jesse as an honorable symbol of the returning draft resister. "We thought that if Carter welcomed Jesse home, it might have a mending, healing effect on the nation," Bozeman said.

Winchester albums were then sent to Carter, Charles Kirbo (who was one of the chief architects of the pardon), Hamilton Jordan and other Presidential advisors along with explanatory cover letters.

While refusing to speculate on the effectiveness of such actions, Carter's special press assistant, Jim Purks, did confirm that Free, who is now the White House Congressional Liaison, sent letters about Winchester to the Presidential Transition Team. "I'm sure Kirbo took input from lots of people," Parks said in response to our inquiry. Then he echoed Bozeman's wishful thinking: "One of the President's desires was to mend and heal.

An additional contact may have been secured through Bozeman's Tennessee-based Mountain Sound Company. Mountain Sound does work for The Charlie Daniel's Band and The Marshall Tucker Band, both of which are affiliated with Phil Waldren, president of Capricorn Records and a major Carter fundraiser. Both of these bands played at the inaugural festivities.