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JESSE WINCHESTER

Quiet Comeback of the Invisible Man

BY HOWARD DRUCKMAN

JESSE WINCHESTER'S CAREER has always been haunted by an astonishing debut. Produced by Robbie Robertson in 1969, between the Band's second and third albums, *Jesse Winchester* is steeped in their common style of Southern-gothic rock. Melancholy songs like "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz" and "Yankee Lady" told Winchester's own story, of an exiled drifter haunted by loss, longing and wanderlust. The songs established him as an important voice and earned a cult of followers. An acknowledged masterpiece, the LP's recently been reissued by Rhino Records.



"Part of me wants success and part says it's shameful to make a display of yourself."

But Winchester pretty much hates it. "It just sounds awful to me," he says in a soft Southern drawl, over a glass of red wine in Montreal. "I don't like my voice, and I don't like the production. It always disturbed me to be considered a folk musician because I grew up loving the Drifters, doo-wap and popular music. I *love* commercial music, and I *want* to make commercial music. The people who like my first album like left-wing, singer/songwriter, 'artistic' kind of music, which I don't. To me, my first album was just a failed attempt to sound like what the new one sounds like."

You won't find two more different LP's. *Humour Me*, Winchester's first record in eight years, is a smooth, upbeat, occasionally maudlin product of Nashville sessionland. Winchester produced himself as light country pop; sweeping violins, echoing electric pianos, mellow sax solos – Adult Contemporary, Music City-style. But the better songs prove that he's sustained a gift for the concise, affecting songwriting. "Let's Make A Baby King" offers his funky, typically wry sort of gospel; "They Just Can't Help Themselves" proves his mastery of effective wordplay; "If I Were Free" demonstrates that his old drifting spirit is fully intact; "I Want To Mean Something To You" is as soulful a ballad as he's written.

Winchester spent the last eight years writing songs. He lives in Montreal and mails the tunes to his Nashville-based publishers, the Bug Music Group (which he joined in 1986 on John Hiatt's recommendation). Bug has placed his songs with Anne Murray, Michael Martin Murphey, and is entertaining interest from Smokey Robinson.

But Jesse's been invisible, living on his back catalogue and royalties. He gave up recording, which he dislikes, for performing solo, which he loves – playing relaxed, confident shows to longtime

followers across North America and Europe. He's 44 with a 14-year-old daughter, Alice, and a 16-year-old son, James (who plays in a rock'n'roll band). Winchester and his wife Leslie recently divorced after 20-odd years together. He didn't need the headache of recording (and being misinterpreted) again.

Sugarhill Records president Barry Poss had to coax him into it. "I couldn't believe he wasn't recording," says Poss, a long-term fan. "It was a slow process getting him to record – letting him know how much people still wanted to hear him. I was surprised how strong his sense of himself as a pop singer is. Our label is more rough and rootsy, but I wasn't about to push him."

"I have a very ambivalent character," Winchester says, when asked why he dislikes recording. "Part of me wants worldly success and part says it's shameful to make a display of yourself, to try to convince people how good you are."

The contradictions started early. Winchester's father was Protestant, his mother Roman Catholic, Jesse spent 12 years in Catholic school, and though it remains a big part of his life (and his work), he is a skeptic. The Memphis Winchesters were distinguished in politics, law and the military, but Jesse, a pacifist, was smitten by the rampant R&B of his hometown. He studied piano for 10 years, and spent several playing the organ in church. He became a rock'n'roller at 14, the day he bought his first guitar and played it onstage that night with his first band. Winchester worked in several bar bands while nominally studying philosophy in Amherst, Massachusetts. He dropped out of a year's study in Munich to join the Night Sounds, who played rock'n'roll covers across the Bavarian Alps.

When he returned to Memphis, the city's racial tension "drove me nuts." He worked as a cocktail-lounge pianist for six months, and when his draft notice came in 1967 Winchester hightailed it to Montreal. Almost on arrival, he joined Les Astronautes with whom he played across Quebec. "I was havin' fun, but I had no money, no ambitions, no nuthin', and I'd been cut off from the South. Nobody in the band spoke any English, so that drove me to start writing."

Winchester quit when they decided to wear astronaut suits onstage. He drifted between pickup bands, and started playing small coffeehouses across central Canada. While he was working on a demo tape in Ottawa, a friend brought Robbie Robertson down for a listen. Impressed, Robertson produced the first album in Toronto, played on it along with Levon Helm, and had Winchester open for the Canadian leg of the Band's 1969-1970 tour. He also connected him with the Band's redoubtable manager, the late Albert Grossman.

Winchester tells it politely, but it's clear that Grossman dominated his career. Jesse's records were on Grossman's Bearsville label, his songs were published by Grossman, and Grossman managed him, too. For the second album, Grossman dispatched managees Todd Rundgren and the Full Tilt Boogie Band to Toronto. But Jesse was unhappy with the resulting record, so he scrapped it and cut an acoustic one.

Third Down, 110 To Go was a spare work that veered from funky blues to wry, bitter folk. It's tough romance, restlessness and fragile hope would soon become Winchester's trademarks. *Learn To Love It* and *Let The Rough Side Drag* found Jesse more immigrant than exile, settling down with a wife in his adopted homeland, still longing for his birthplace and confirming his gospel roots.

In his songs and his life, Winchester's longing for belief has been plagued by doubt. He secularizes the sacred to make it more real (and once wrote a doo-wap song called "Jesus Was A Teenager, Too"). More recently, Jesse's attacked TV preachers with a refrain of "swing low, big old Continental."

"I don't like intolerance," he says "and I think Christianity has grown way past whatever Jesus might have intended. The message was to love one another, and that's pretty much it. On the days that I do believe in God, he's a forgiving father, who ultimately understands and loves us if He exists."

GOD'S OWN JUKEBOX

"If all that was involved was playing a song for a tape recorder, it'd be great to record," says Winchester. "But there's so much peripheral stuff that I'd just as soon someone else record it, and then go lip-sync it on Dick Clark." But Jesse was unusually pleased with the process of recording *Humour Me*. He used a Gibson ES 335 guitar straight into the board, and Yamaha DX7 and KX88 keyboards.

Onstage Winchester plays a classical nylon-string Takamine Hirade. For amplification, he uses a Sony ECM 50 lavalier mike – the kind used for radio and TV interviews – taped into the guitar's soundhole. "I just tried it one time and liked it," he explains. At home, Jesse records on a Fostex.

If Winchester's early records comprise a body of work unsurpassed by any singer/songwriter in the '70s, the next three almost belie the achievement. In a radical shift, 1977's *Nothing But A Breeze* was slickly produced by Brian Ahearn. "Twigs And Seeds" was a jokey pot ditty, "Rhuma Man" a cute trifle; Winchester the exile/immigrant had apparently lightened up and become a matter-of-fact pop entertainer. When Jimmy Carter declared amnesty for draft resisters that year, it was Jesse's first opportunity to tour America. A full-length jaunt was mounted, full-page ads were bought, feature stories were written and the album was released. But old fans were alienated, few new ones materialized and sales remained marginal. Winchester continued to go for the slick studio sound with *A Touch On The Rainy Side* and *Talk Memphis*, recorded in his hometown with producer Willie Mitchell.

"On those albums," Winchester explains, "Albert imposed the producers and musicians. He was generous, maybe overly so. He thought you could make a great record if you hired the greatest people, but I just didn't enjoy it. Sometimes it's better to work with somebody you are comfortable with. He wanted a hit, and so did I, so I didn't fight it. I don't remember ever consciously trying to project an image, but I've stooped to as every depth it's possible to stoop to as far as abandoning principles."

As Grossman lost interest in the music business, Winchester simply vanished. Fed up with producers he built a home studio, toured and collected royalties. His records went out of print, his kids grew up. Grossman passed on in 1986, and Winchester looked for new publishers. Through the invisible years, he never stopped writing.

"That's the high point of any song," he says. "Everything else is downhill. I write every day, just playing and singing, hoping an idea will come. Usually a line has too many words, so you start taking 'em out. You can always find a way to say things in fewer words. To me, that's what country songwriting is all about."

These days, Winchester's spare lyrics and rich, haunted voice earn constant comparison to Lyle Lovett. Lovett has been covering Winchester songs live, and picked *Humour Me* as one of his top 10 records of 1988. The two finally met at the Winnipeg Folk Festival last year. "He was a very amiable person," says Jesse. "But I don't hear the similarity, myself. Not to criticize, but my own tastes are more mainstream."

Though he dislikes the compromises of his later work, Winchester is pleased with *Humour Me*, maybe because it was his *own* baby this time. And though he dislikes the “artistic” sound of his early work, those are (for now) the records that will earn him a rightful place in rock’n’roll history. “I don’t know what Albert envisioned,” he says. “Or what I, in my darkest dreams, envision. But I was so unhappy then, and I’m so comfortable and happy now.”

Winchester has been immortalized anyway – as an answer in a rock’n’roll board game. “In a Trivial Pursuit game,” he laughs, “where I belong.”

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