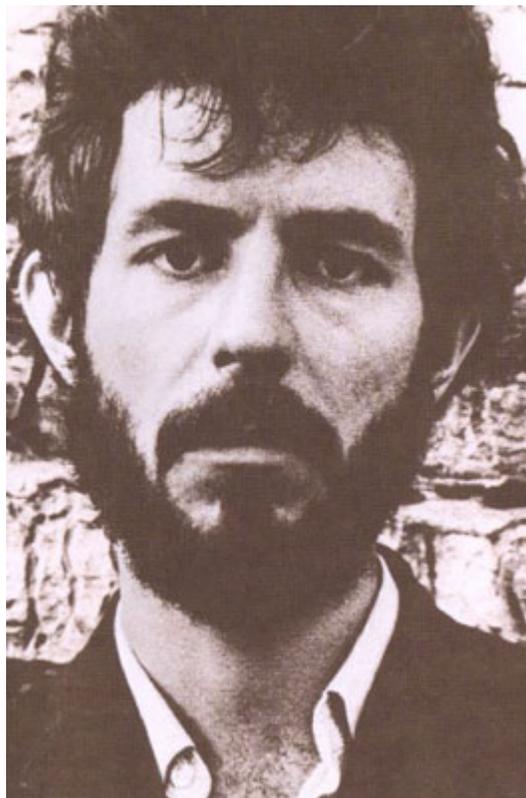


Jesse Winchester's Trip To Canada

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ –

MONTREAL – Jesse Winchester arrived in Montreal early in the summer of 1967. He moved because of the Draft and was faced with the difficult task of singing his own inimitably American music in Canada, which is notorious for virtual non-support of its own talent. The clubs are few and small in Montreal, and it is not the easiest place to earn a living singing English songs in a predominantly French city.

Now Winchester has an album out (on Ampex), produced by the Band's Robbie Robertson. It is a firm, beautifully performed and composed record, one that will surely mark Winchester as one of the important singer-songwriters. The fact that Robertson plays lead guitar on the album and that Levon Helm chips in on drums and mandolin here and there is bound to be of interest. But it is Winchester's album through and through, conveying a unique personal sensibility.



Singing comes naturally to him, but being exposed to a mass public is something else. "I can't see many good things coming out of it," Winchester says in quiet but considered tones.

"Fame and Fortune – everyone knows what Fame and Fortune is all about, but yet I grew up admiring Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis and the rock and roll stars. Those were the heroes that I automatically gravitated to. It was just natural for me to want to be like them. There was a point in my life when I could've played for nickels and dimes on street corners. I didn't want to be eighty and sit back on what I missed. Fame and Fortune – there's nothing you can do about it, you've just got to take your chances."

Winchester, born in Shreveport, Louisiana, 25 years ago, has lived most of his life in Memphis. He learned how to play piano when he was six, played organ in church at 12, and picked up a guitar at 14. "I wanted to be in a rock and roll band real bad and a friend came up and said they needed a guitar player for the group, so I went out and got a guitar, learned three chords in the key of E and I was in the band that night."

He went on the road, playing in bars and clubs, getting into a college circuit in Massachusetts ("... playing for fraternity dances ... Taj Mahal used to work that same circuit"). He was with a band in Hamburg, Germany for a spell before deciding to come to Canada.

"When I first got to Canada I was completely treading water. I didn't know which way was up. I was in a bad mood all the time."

He joined a French Canadian dance group and went out into the small towns and hinterlands of Quebec. After which he knew for sure that he had to step out front. Since then, his reputation grew, slowly but surely, to the point where last November he shared the bill with the Band at their concert in Montreal's plush Palace des Arts.

Winchester's music is rich in its depth and heritage, as it is a consummation of everything he grew up with. His sound is clean, like the Band's, Southern, with measures of rock and roll, gospel, even jazz – whatever comes naturally.

He sings as he writes, in a gentle but strong voice. He's a relaxed, perfectly paced singer, possessing beautiful ballad phrasing and plenty of funk on up-tempo numbers. Winchester, like the best singer-songwriters, does not separate words, music and performance – it's all one thing.

"It used to be that a song could get across all the feeling you wanted from very, very simple words. Now the word has become more important. But, to me, I still like the *sound* song. I don't like a lotta words. The fewer the better, the simpler the better ... in everything."

Simplicity finds its way into all of Winchester's songs. There is an ease, a matter-of-factness about them that is difficult to resist. He carries this into all of the moods he seeks to convey, whether they are melancholy or exuberant. In front of an unfettered telltale melody, Winchester takes a fond, reflective look at the "Yankee Lady":

*I lived with the decent folks
In the hills of old Vermont
Where what you do all day
Depends on what you want
I took up with a woman there
Though I was still a kid
And I smile like the sun to think of
The lovin' that we did -
She rose each morning and went to work
And she kept me with her pay
I was making love all night
And playing guitar all day
I got apple cider and homemade bread
To make a man say grace
Clean linens on my bed
And a warm-feet fireplace-*

The range of feelings that Winchester expresses in the album's eleven songs is remarkable. "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz" is a sad ballad, something you might hear Gene Pitney sing. "Biloxi" and "Jump Rope Song" are fragrantly whimsical. "Black Dog" conveys a haunting foreboding atmosphere, while "Pay Day" and "That's The Touch I Like" are jumpy numbers that carry a hint of Elvis. There is even a non-sensical, delightfully nothing song called "Snow" a humorous comment on winter in Montreal.

Winchester simply sings away, with nothing forced or put-on. The back-ups are fluid and mellow, rocking and rolling and, at times, just being quiet about it. The album, recorded in Toronto, is also a fine production achievement for Robertson, simply because he has remained faithful to the singer.

What kind of atmosphere does Jesse like an audience-performer relationship to generate? "A party. That's about the best thing to happen, with all the things that go into a party. A party has a loud part, a quiet part, just a social gathering is all it is. I don't think music has to be elevated to the kind of position it's in now, with musicians being semi-deities. It's better if musicians are in one corner playing music, you can dance or talk or just have a good time. A musician is a musician; he's a special person but so is everybody else."

As for the future, Winchester has many ideas in mind: starting a club as a home base; recording another album, this time mainly of other people's songs; doing a few concerts and club dates from time to time; writing songs for other people.

"I don't want to get into this business of trying to be the top shit or something like that. I'd rather hang in there all the time with good music, slow and steady, and share it, rather than set the world on fire all at once. But you really don't have a choice in these matters. The best thing you can do is let it all go and hope for the best."

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