

## Jesse Winchester does the brand new American waltz



By Frank Rose

Photographs by Langdon Clay

**Burlington, Vermont** – The Canadian border is only 40 miles from here, and if Jesse Winchester had shown his face south of it before January 21<sup>st</sup>, he would have been a more likely candidate for the town jail than the stage of the Municipal Auditorium. Times change, however, and on January 21<sup>st</sup> they changed for Jesse Winchester. That was the day Jimmy Carter issued his declaration of amnesty for draft resisters. Winchester could come back to the United States. Four months later, on April 21<sup>st</sup>, he's playing his first U.S. concert in a decade in Burlington. His blow-dry haircut notwithstanding, what Winchester really looks like onstage is a Confederate soldier with an electric guitar slung over his shoulders facing an audience full of adoring Yankees. He is not, of course, a Confederate soldier, but a singer originally from Memphis and now from Montreal who delivers his stage patter with a Southern drawl and shouts things like "Lemme hear ya say oui!" when the crowd begins to stir. His fans do know from oui, but they do know a rebel when they see one.

Tonight at the auditorium, he and his English-Canadian band pay their respects to Carter first thing, with a special salute tacked onto the end of "Why Do You Like Roosevelt?," the Depression-era tune Winchester has rewritten to explain his antiwar actions. But it's a line the audience already knows that gets the cheers: "The call to bloody glory came/ And I would not raise my hand." As he sings these words, his feet rooted to the stage, Winchester appears to possess the stoic determination of an old weathered fencepost. The crowd responds as if to a spark of electricity.

Winchester is not what you'd call a dynamic performer, though sometimes he tries to be. Tonight, when he works out a slinky dance step on an upbeat number called "Thumba Man," the audience cheers him like he's a baby taking his very first step. Jesse smiles and basks in the spotlight. The audience pretends not to notice the inevitable first-night foul-ups – the lousy sound system and the poorly paced set; Jesse could get away with anything. After all, he got a standing ovation just for walking onstage.

Winchester certainly appreciates his audience; but he also seems a little embarrassed, maybe even troubled, by the hero's welcome he's receiving. "I hadn't expected it," he says the next day. "I'm not sure if I really think it's a good thing or not."

Is he afraid of being known as ..... "The singing draft dodger?" he chuckles. "I don't know if there's any way around it. I know for my part I'm gonna be a singer. If other people want to add draft dodger, that's their business. It puts me in a funny position, though."

Jesse Winchester has been in a funny position since the day in January 1967, when, motivated by his draft notice, he boarded an airplane with a one-way ticket to Montreal. "People say, 'Coming to Canada, that must have been a hard decision,'" he says now. "But that was really the easy part. The hard part comes later, when you start trying to live your life in line with that decision. That's when it gets complicated."



*Rehearsing in Woodstock*

Jesse had been home in Memphis only a few months when he had to leave. He'd graduated from Williams College the preceding June and stayed in Massachusetts to play in an Amherst bar all summer. He hadn't figured out what to do about the draft. The week before he received his notice he had learned, from a newspaper article about a draft resisters group, that Canada was a haven. When the notice came Winchester read up on Canada in the encyclopedia and discovered that Montreal was the second-largest French-speaking city in the world. It sounded all right.

He had no philosophical or political objections to war, even the one in Vietnam. "I just didn't feel that I was so right and anybody else was so wrong that I should pick up a gun and shoot him for it," he explains. "And I was so offended by someone's coming up to me and presuming to tell me who I should kill and what my life was worth that I didn't even want to discuss it with them."

He arrived in Montreal with \$300 in his pocket and no friends in town. His Southern drawl was unmistakable, and since he didn't feel like lying about why he'd left the States, he had a hard time finding a job. Finally he gave up looking for straight work and joined a rock band called Les Astronauts. He was the only English-speaking member. Jesse claims he wasn't homesick or depressed about being in exile. "I made a new home from the first day I got there," he says. "I didn't have much choice." He also says he probably would have become a professional musician even if economic necessity hadn't forced him into it – but he can't be sure. As it was, he became a fixture on the Montreal scene, singing in clubs and

coffeehouses and putting together short-lived bands. When club owners asked for original material, he began writing. "Before that," he says, "it never occurred to me that you could write your own songs."

His break came when a friend introduced him to the Band's Robbie Robertson. Robertson played a demo tape for manager Albert Grossman (Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, the Band). Grossman brought Winchester into his stable and onto his Bearsville record label. Winchester's first LP, produced by Robertson and released in 1971, set the pattern for the ones that followed: high critical acclaim, minimal

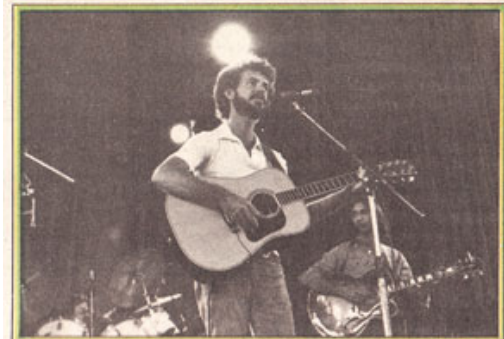
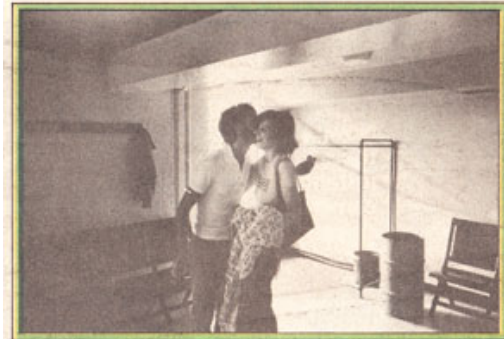
sales. Jesse took it philosophically: "I thought I was going to be rich and famous in a matter of weeks," he grins. "I was disappointed when there were no explosions or anything." The folks at Bearsville say there were no explosions because Winchester couldn't tour. Now that he can, Bearsville's under pressure to produce. To that end, the label has just released Winchester's fifth album, *Nothing But A Breeze*, a mere seven months after his previous one; the previous four albums had been spaced over six years. Winchester admits that the release of *Nothing But A Breeze* – a carefully polished album produced by Brian Ahern and graced by Emmylou Harris' harmonies – was timed to take advantage of his amnesty windfall, though it wasn't rushed: he had the material ready.

So far, the only explosions have been in the media – People, Who's Who on CBS, an assortment of Boston papers. It's strange enough coming back after a decade, but coming back a star is even stranger, and Jesse is ambivalent about it. "To be coming back and making money at it, which hopefully I'll be doing – that's a little hard to reconcile," he says. "I'm not particularly proud of it. It doesn't seem fair to turn your back on your country and then come back when the coast is clear and make money. There doesn't seem to be anything really wrong with it, but there doesn't seem to be anything right with it either."

Where breaking Winchester is concerned, "low-key" is the watchword at Bearsville. Jesse leaves details to them and to his soft-spoken, Montreal-based manager, Arnie Naiditch. All he wants to do, he says, is give "atmosphere direction."

Atmosphere and tradition hang heavy in Jesse Winchester's life. The Winchesters are connected with the Lees of Virginia; Jesse' fifth great-grandfather helped Andrew Jackson found Memphis. The men in his family have been lawyers as far back as anyone can remember. The only rebel was his father, who came back after World War II with a strange look in his eyes and bought a Mississippi farm on the GI Bill.

Winchester's work is as powerful an evocation of the Southern idyll as has been set to music. Songs such as "Mississippi You're On My Mind" and "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz" testify to the sweet siren call of the Old South; others hint at the Old Testament righteousness lying hot and dusty and close to the soil. "Oh Lord, when your jeweler's eye / Peers into my soul," he sings in "My Songbird," "Oh Lord, I am overcome with shame." This song, about a female songbird who will remain a prisoner in her gilded cage because the singer "just can't let her go," is as finely tooled and as obsessively ingrown as anything you'll find in Hank Williams or Flannery O'Connor.



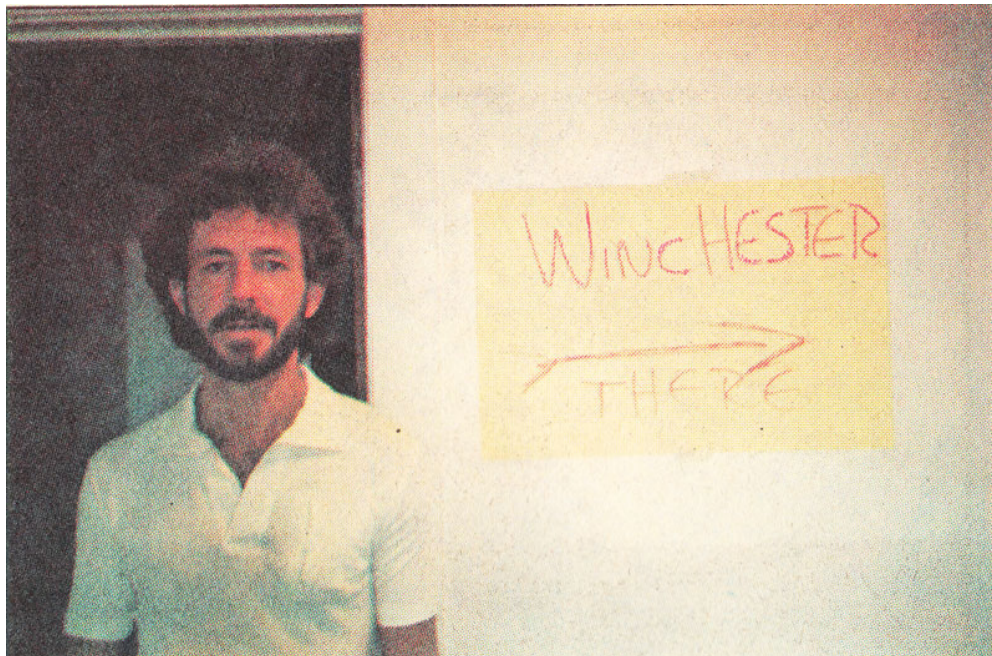
Top right, with his French-Canadian wife Leslie, after a week of rehearsals; center, surveying the hall before his concert in Burlington; bottom, Winchester onstage his first American concert in a decade.

Winchester's Southern Gothic is the kind that harkens back to the straight and narrow and hardens with age. It's frequently, but not always, accompanied by religious fervor. With Winchester, the form of revivalism is there, but the substance apparently lies dormant. "It's kind of irrelevant to my life now," he says. "It's just that traditional thing. I'm not sure if it means anything or not, but I'm not taking any chances."

The last time Jesse played Memphis was at a little dive that no longer exists. "I don't remember the name of the place," he says. "I remember the manager and the crowd real well. They were kind of low-life types – alcoholics, prostitutes. It wasn't a real healthy place. I had a strange repertoire – old Elvis Presley songs, some country numbers, a couple of George Gershwin songs. It went over well, but the manager wanted someone who could interact with the clientele a little more. I hadn't gotten that far along with my showmanship yet." He chuckles again.

Winchester went back for the first time in March. "I noticed little things," he says. "The street names have been changed – there's an Elvis Presley Boulevard now. The Negro (radio) station that used to play rhythm and blues plays the same kind of disco stuff everybody else does. I was amazed at the things I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten how beautiful a town it was. I was amazed at how Canadian I'd become, too."

Jesse became a Canadian citizen in 1973; despite some uneasiness over the Separatist movement, he and his French-Canadian wife Leslie and their two children intend to remain, either in Montreal or in the countryside nearby. He finds it awkward when Americans say 'Welcome home.' "I know they mean well," he says, "but my home is Canada now."



He has a couple of friends left in Memphis and a lot of family, and he saw most of them when he went back. His grandfather, an old-time Southern gentleman whose sense of duty and patriotism was outraged by Jesse's move to Canada, had passed away several years before: "I'm sure he loved me, 'till the day he died," said Jesse, "but I was disappointment to him." A cousin had been shot down over Vietnam; Jesse's not very close to that part of the family anymore. But he saw his mother and his sister, who works in a radio station in Vicksburg, and everybody else, and then he went back north.

Jesse doesn't know if he has a following in Memphis or not, but he's booked into the Ritz on May 19<sup>th</sup>. It would be interesting to see if the crowd responded to "Nothing But A Breeze," the way they did in Burlington. "Me, I want to live with my feet in Dixie," Jesse sang, "And my head in the cool blue North." It was stunning. You could hear the sharp intake of breath: you could feel the tingle spreading through the crowd. Jesse just played right through it.

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Letter to the Editor in subsequent issue  
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Rolling Stone Magazine (RS242)  
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Correspondence & Love Letters

Thumb mistake

In "Jesse Winchester Does The Brand New American Waltz" (RS240) you refer to Jesse Winchester's song, "Thumba Man." Thumbbody must be mixed up. The title is "Rhumba Man" (as in the rhumba dance Jesse does so uniquely in his stage performance of the song).

It was thure nice to read about Jesse, tho!

Nicolette Larson  
Marina Del Ray, California

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**Note:**

Nicolette Larson who sang background vocals on *Nothing But A Breeze* in 1977, went on to record "Rhumba Girl" ("Rhumba Man") in 1979 and had a minor hit with it.

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