

Stumbling Into Heaven

Jesse Winchester

BY DANIEL WOLFF — 2000

Daniel Wolff's bestselling biography of Sam Cooke, "You Send Me," won the Ralph J. Gleason Award for best music book of 1995. His writing on photography includes the first nationally published article on Ernest C. Withers in Double Take, and he is a contributor to the Danny Lyon retrospective catalogue, "Photo Film, 1959-1980." His poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including the Paris Review and Partisan Review. "The Memphis Blues Again: Six Decades of Memphis Music Photographs," has just been published by the Penguin Group. Books by Daniel Wolff are available at amazon.com, and other on-line sites, as well as most booksellers. Below find Wolff's wanderings through Jesse Winchester-land.

In the parking lot behind the r&b club, the band is taking a break, and a young man approaches his hero. The young man is a student at the local Catholic high school, the middle-class son of a lawyer. His hero is the bandleader, Willie Mitchell, who will go on to national fame as the producer of the classic soul singer, Al Green. But at this time -- 1959, 1960 -- he's fronting a six-piece, horn-driven combo that is the regular house band at the Manhattan Club in Memphis, Tennessee.

As the players have a smoke and try to cool off in the thick Southern air, the young man moves closer. "I just worshipped these musicians," he recalls. "I wanted to be them." Back at Catholic school, he's in a rock&roll band that plays the CYO dances. They do covers of frat-band songs by The Hot Nuts and Hank Ballard's "Annie Had A Baby," masking the lyrics so the chaperones won't get what they're really about. The deep soul sound of songs such as Ray Charles' "What'd I Say" and Barret Strong's "Money," the once-young man now recalls, "changed my life." In the decade after Brown vs. Board of Education, with the modern civil rights movement just beginning to heat up, in a city known nationally for its brutal segregation, rhythm&blues offered the young, white Southerner a glimpse into possibilities he describes as "too funky to be true."

Willie Mitchell is the local epitome of that funk. His band features a laid-back beat that always seems to be catching up with itself, a sweet mix of horns, and a bass line that's made for dancing. Mitchell will go on to inspire and mentor not just Al Green, but the core of the Stax/Volt sound: Booker T and the MGs. He has the key! And, now, the young man works up his nerve to ask Mitchell what sounds like a simple question: who does he consider, like, a really great singer? Which; in that time and place; was not that different from asking: how do I get to heaven?

Mitchell considers, looks out over the dark parking lot, and then answers: "Perry Como."

Perry Como? The middle-aged crooner with the TV show? Perry "Some Enchanted Evening" Como?!

"It really was a sort of turning point for me," recalls Jesse Winchester, the young man in question. "Because I was so arrogant," he goes on, "the way most boys are. Perry Como? Please! It made me start to think [about] my ideas, my prejudices" It's indicative of the kind of artist Winchester would become that he went home and pondered his hero's simultaneously hilarious and worrisome answer.

A decade after this encounter, in 1971, Winchester cut his first album: not rhythm&blues at all, but a classic of the singer-songwriter period, produced by Robbie Robertson of The Band and containing memorable tunes including "Yankee Lady," "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz," and "That's The Touch I Like." Winchester became a hero in his own right, albeit an underground one: a Southern folkie more like James Taylor than Al Green. But the night in the parking lot never went away, and, thirty years and eight collections later, Winchester's latest (Gentleman of Leisure; Sugar Hill Records) brings us right back to the Manhattan Club.

In the opening cut from that CD, Winchester flips the name to make it scan better, but we recognize the Club Manhattan and the middle-aged narrator's nostalgia. He's torn. While he loves his "sugar baby," he's left her back home. "I love Club Manhattan, too," he declares, and the implication is that he may love it more. He just has to keep dancing because the house band features this guitar player who sounds just like "a young Steve Cropper," the legendary guitarist with Booker T. and the MG's. Cropper, himself, was a young, white Southerner mesmerized by Willie Mitchell and the Memphis club scene.

"Just close your eyes," Winchester sings, evoking the club scene in his warm accent, "... and it's nineteen-sixty-two." And then comes the song's twist, which we might as well call the Perry Como twist. When the instrumental break cuts in, it's the real Steve Cropper laying down one of his distinctive, chicken-scratch solos. We know it isn't really 1962, but there's Cropper's guitar, as if to prove what exactly? Winchester's song presents us with nostalgia (or delusion) so deep that it actually seems to turn back time.

Fans of Winchester have come to expect tunes like this: both sweetly danceable and vaguely troubling. Winchester arrived on the music scene with the generation of singer-songwriters that included Taylor, Don McLean, and Melanie. He was amongst the many tagged with the dubious honor of being "the new Bob Dylan" -- and his credentials for the title were actually better than most, what with his connections to Dylan's back-up group, The Band, and his being represented by Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman. Yet, unlike many of his contemporaries, Winchester hadn't come up as a folk-singer. While others were listening to Pete Seeger at the Newport Folk Festival, he was in the Manhattan Club. And while they were studying Woody Guthrie, Winchester was paying attention to the work of pop writers like Leiber and Stoller and Doc Pomus. To this day, his idea of getting back to his roots is to sit on the porch with a guitar and pick out Drifters' songs.

Also, unlike many of his contemporaries, Winchester's early popularity never led to stardom. The singer never eclipsed the songwriter. Winchester's sound was influential (most obviously with Lyle Lovett who

sings and writes so much like the older man, many of us suspect he is Winchester in a strange wig). But it was the songs that charted, not the singer. Nicolette Larson had a hit with Winchester's "Rhumba Girl," Stony Edwards popularized "Mississippi, You're On My Mind," everyone from Ralph Stanley to Joan Baez have cut "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz," and recent Winchester tunes have been featured on collections by The Judds and Jimmie Dale Gilmore.

Winchester's songwriting style can be described as classic pop. It unabashedly reflects the era when he came of musical age. As a teenager, he spent nights lying in bed, listening to legendary Memphis DJ, Dewey Phillips. Phillips was a wild man, most commonly remembered as the first to play an Elvis Presley song on the radio. "He'd start a record off," Winchester remembers, "and he'd say, 'Whoa, I like the introduction to that song! Let's play it again!' He'd lift the needle off the record and play the intro three or four times ... It was hilarious free style." Behind that style was a content that Winchester studied hard. Dewey Phillips' show offered a daily mix of music from the sophisticated harmonies of the Platters to the country blues of Howling Wolf, any kind of song as long as it had that thing.

The folk/blues sound that led to Dylan was out there, but not where Winchester was focused. In Memphis, it was the horn tradition that drove the music. "Tenor sax was the solo instrument," Winchester recalls of those days, "the guitar was strictly for rhythm." You could trace the band tradition back to W.C. Handy, the "Father of the Blues," with horn-playing such a proud component of the Beale Street heritage, that it was a featured part of the curriculum in local high schools. There, teachers who'd played with the big bands of the 40's taught students not only how to swing but also how to read and write charts.

Winchester's bandmaster was Ralph Hale, the brother of Jack Hale who played trombone with the Memphis Horns. Citing Ruth Brown, The Clovers, and Ivory Joe Hunter as evidence, Winchester recites the musical mix as if it were a favorite recipe: "The residue of swing feel is what made early r&b and rock and roll so sweet and tasty." That flavor would eventually go national with the Memphis sound of stars such as Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, and Wilson Pickett

There's nothing odd about a white Southerner falling in love with black music. You could argue that it's the story of rock&roll in a nutshell. But what we may forget in our nostalgia for 1962 are the social and political implications of the time. Classic soul emerged with the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, and the sound drew you; dancing as you went; across certain strong if invisible social boundaries. That was brought home to Winchester by what he thought was a temporary move north to attend the Ivy League, Williams College.

Here, he ran into a prejudice that he still finds traces of: the blanket condemnation of Southerners as ignorant and biased. "I ..." he begins and then pauses, thinking about how to say this. "I came north, and I was dealing with people who looked down on me because of the racism [of the South]. But these were people who didn't know two black people by their first name. Whereas, all my playmates were black: the music I grew

up with, the religion I grew up with, the gospel people. All this influenced my life."

At the same time, it was at Williams that Winchester first found himself dealing with black people, as he says, "on an equal basis. And I just sort of behaved very badly.... You're sitting there talking to somebody, and you say, 'Hey, how about that Willie Mays?' Totally dumb ... completely false." All the awkwardness of asking Willie Mitchell a question came rolling back.

Winchester graduated from college in 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, and was immediately classified 1A. His next move he would later explain in a song lyric: "I'm baptized by water // so I'll pass on the one by fire." He left Tennessee and moved to Montreal, determined not just to avoid the draft but to become a Canadian. "At the time, the rules of the game were that you could leave so long as you never came back," he's said. "That was the deal, and I was prepared to live up to that deal." It was in Canada that he first played music for a living. And it's also where he began considering his Southern heritage. He described his expatriate situation on 1977's "Nothing But A Breeze," as having "My feet in Dixie // and my head in the cool, cool north."

From that perspective, he started looking at his own bias about the South. Winchester remembers how he and his high school friends used to tune in Saturday afternoon TV in Memphis just to laugh at the Flatt & Scruggs show. What could be stupider than that big hair, those thick accents, the corny jokes? Though it may have seemed a cultural jump, a white, educated son of Memphis was more likely to find his way to Willie Mitchell, in that era, than to country music. Deep in the privacy of his own bedroom, he might secretly flip over his Jerry Lee Lewis single so he could listen to the country ballad on the B-side -- but he'd never tell anyone. The part of the Southern musical legacy he'd admit to was "Great Balls of Fire," not "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

In Canada, that changed. It started, he recalls, with an album of Johnny Cash's greatest hits, found in a girlfriend's apartment and played over and over. The fascination, Winchester insists, wasn't so much nostalgia for a place that was now off-limits, as a newfound appreciation that, culturally, he was Southern. "I love the food, I love the music, I love the language, I love the people." Where once country music had sounded as un-hip as ... Perry Como, now Winchester couldn't believe his own ignorance. "Jesus! What was I thinking? Dolly Parton is a stone-genius!" Or, as he advises his lover in the title track from his 1981 album, *Talk Memphis*, "I wish you would // talk Memphis, 'cause you sound so good."

If Winchester first emerged as a singer/songwriter in the folk tradition, he has since explored a particular mix of sounds that are often thought of as incompatible. "I still think the best place to be," he says, "is right on the line between country and R&B." The result is vocals that owe a debt to soul music, lyrics that aim for the condensed poetry of pop hits, and a narrative drive and sense of humor with a country spin. Winchester's latest release, *Gentleman of Leisure*, straddles that line (or are they lines?) between North and South, black and white, rural and urban. It's tempting to call this CD, if not a

culmination, certainly a contemplation of his past and his influences. From "Club Manhattan" on, these modest, melodic songs return again and again to the connected themes of aging, self-delusion, and desire; all played out against this rich musical history.

Take the apparently innocent, even bouncy tune, "Just Like New." We can listen happily, tapping our foot as Winchester sings about Elvis Presley's Cadillac: how it's "just like new" despite "all that it's been through." In fact, the car reminds us of the birth of rock&roll and that whole era when, Winchester declares, "the weather [was] so fair, the future so fine." Of course, we know what happened to Elvis -- and to the era -- so that after a couple of listens the meaning of the song manages to gently reverse, and, without Winchester ever mentioning it outright, we begin to consider how nothing and no one stays "just like new."

How that gradual corruption happens is the subject of "Evil Angel." According to Winchester, the devil works in small increments: "First you start 'em with a little// Till they just can't get enough." The examples of temptation broaden from whiskey and cigarettes to love, and the implications leak into apparently benign songs such as "Sweet Little Shoe." Here, again, our narrator is in a club dancing the night away. The song is about him showing off his best steps, and we may want to leave it at that: good times, good music. But Winchester keeps bringing up bothersome details; for some reason he needs to tell us that he's dancing in his "school" shoes, and they're "murder on my feet." He doesn't come right out and admit his partner is under-age, only that she moves just like her mother. Once he mentions that the neighborhood ladies are talking about a scandal, it's a little harder not to see a shadow creeping across the scene.

Ambiguities and contradictions are what power Winchester's work. "If you love somebody," Winchester sings on one ballad, " .. that's what makes you weak.// But if you know you're weak ... O it's a funny thing// That's what makes you strong." Then, he turns the humble-and-sensitive guise inside out. "If ever your pride should lead to a fall," he proposes on another cut, "bring it to me. I've got no pride at all." A generous offer, right? Look again.

In Winchester's world, the past is present, every joke is barbed, and the human animal is an endlessly self-deceiving romantic. Gentleman of Leisure's title track is a simultaneously amusing and lacerating portrait of the artist as an aging pimp. It goes hand in hand with "Freewheeler," which appears to be your basic, carefree road song, except that in order to keep "a'rolling easy," the narrator will "run rough-shod over lovers ...// Not just one time, not just two times // I mean time and time again."

The ambiguities are especially clear in Winchester's religious songs, which go back as far as 1972's "I'm Looking For A Miracle" and continue on his latest release. "If you lined us up and said, 'Believers on this side, non-believers over there,'" he explains, "I'd go with the believers. But I'd probably drag my feet a little bit." That may come from his Catholic upbringing (a training, he's decided, that never really goes away), although he says that "the most spiritual thing" in

his life today is probably the black gospel music he first heard on Memphis radio.

"Wander My Way Home," from his newest CD, appears to be firmly in that tradition, right down to the backup group: the legendary gospel quartet, the Fairfield Four. Yet, even here, ambiguity creeps in. The declaration of faith in the chorus is: "You may stumble into heaven// You may wander your way home." As one of the Fairfield Four pointed out to Winchester during the recording session, "You're not going to get into heaven if you stumble." That, it turns out, is the point. When Winchester reprises this tune at the end of the CD, a searing electric guitar suddenly cuts through the harmonies, as if to underline his commitment not to resolve but to examine contradictions.

"I think what we're stuck with in the South and what's of value," novelist Walker Percy has written, speaking of his fellow Southern writer, Flannery O'Connor, "are two things: one is religion and the other is the Negro." Percy goes on to call the religious tradition "a hideously complicated business" personified by a childhood "seeing Jesus Saves and Garret Snuff signs" side by side. It's this cultural mix of religion and commerce and race that first produced rock&roll, and, as a child of Memphis, Winchester continues to ponder it. "Maybe the well got poisoned by slavery," he muses. "I just don't know. But certainly in my case, it's been a very important part of my life: trying to deal with it and sort it out. I'm not sure I'll ever get over it." Certainly, this large Southern "it" continues to feed his music. Winchester received amnesty, along with other draft evaders, in 1977, but he continues to live in Canada, occasionally touring the United States, keeping himself open to a kind of reconciliation of these contradictions which he admits is largely spiritual. "The brotherhood of man, you know? The lion laying down with the lamb. That part of faith I definitely got."

Winchester tells a story about returning to Memphis with his youngest son. The boy was a teenager at the time, not much younger than Winchester was in the parking lot with Willie Mitchell. During the visit home, Winchester's mother suggests that he take the boy out and show him Memphis.

"Ordinarily," Winchester explains, "that means take him to the Peabody Hotel to see the ducks, whatever. But I got in the car and I said, 'Okay. We're going to see Memphis.' And I headed south: to South Memphis. Where the old Stax studio was. South Memphis is black," he continues, "and we start driving through, and it's worse than I even remembered. Like Europe after the Second World War. I started looking for the old Stax studio, and it turns out it's been razed to the ground."

Still, father and son get out, walk around the devastated neighborhood, talk to some of the people. After a while, there's nothing to do but get back in the car and drive away.

Which must have left his son thinking he was crazy, right? Winchester considers the question. "I don't think so," he says. "I think he understood what I was trying to do. Because you can live in Memphis and never, never see that."

Never see this part of the city? Or never see a world "too funky to be true?" Winchester's music swears by a musical vision, which it also admits never quite existed -- not the way it was dreamed, anyway: alone at night, listening to the radio.

Ah, Perry Como.

- Daniel Wolff