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THE ONLY FOOLS ON THE ROAD TONIGHT ARE THE FOOLS ON THE MIDNIGHT BUS

By Andy Childs

“The next number is by a songwriter who we really like ... his name’s Jesse Winchester.” (A liberal smattering of applause). “Great ... you like him too!” That was Paul Bailey of the late lamented Chilli Willi & The Red Hot Peppers introducing “Midnight Bus” at the Zigzag Fifth Anniversary concert at the Roundhouse one Sunday afternoon in May 1974. Judging by the enthusiastic response which that introduction received, I would have thought that Jesse Winchester’s music would be pretty close to the hearts of a lot of Zigzagers, but even if nobody who reads the rag nowadays went to that concert, how come the man Winchester didn’t figure at all in either ‘Favorite Lyricists’ or ‘Artiste You’d Most Like To See Featured in Zigzag’ polls recently conducted by Mag? Eh? What’s the matter with you all ... been brainwashed by all this punk-rock tripe or something? Don’t you realise that Jesse Winchester is one of the very best songwriters you’ll ever have the privilege of hearing?

Whether you give a monkey’s toss or not, I must report that it was my very great honour to meet and interview Jesse Winchester when he made an all-too-brief visit to this country earlier in the year; I also went to see him perform at Dingwalls in London, but due to a high percentage of obnoxious people and various other factors beyond mine or Winchester’s control, I derived precious little enjoyment from the evening. However, my respect and admiration for the man is still considerable, especially now that his immaculate fourth album ‘LET THE ROUGH SIDE DRAG’ is available for the delight of one and all.

Before we begin his story though, you may care to peruse your copy of ZZ48, wherein you find a pioneering introduction to Winchester’s work by Giovanni Dadomo, a man of faultless taste and clear headed perception. (Ed: But isn’t he one of the journalists tirelessly touting “this punk rock tripe?”) Giovanni also interviewed Jesse, about the same time as I did, for Sounds, and as a large part of his transcript wasn’t used, he very kindly gave the rest to me for the purposes of this article. So, you

bumbleheads out there who've never even heard of Jesse Winchester, pay attention! This one's for you...

Jesse Winchester was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1945, and spent most of his childhood in Memphis where his early interest in music was quickly nurtured. By the time he was six years old he'd been given the standard piano lessons, at church, and by fourteen he'd discovered the guitar and rock'n'roll.

"The sort of music that I liked then was "Shake Rattle & Roll," Hank Williams stuff, and any funky music that you could find... there wasn't much of it until Elvis came along."

After a short stint as guitarist in a friend's band, Jesse went to Massachusetts ... "They sent me north to give me an education – a gentleman's education" ... and somehow or other he ended up in Munich on the pretense of studying German and Philosophy, but in actual fact spent most of his time playing in a band ... "just a bar band, a little group. They were all German guys, I was the only American. That was about 1965/66. I came back and finished my last year at school and then I went back down to Memphis and played piano in a cocktail lounge for a while, just treading water really."

The above facts, however, pale in comparison to the next event in Jesse's life, one that changed and re-shaped his career completely. He received his draft papers from Mr. Nixon ... and that meant a long Cong hunting holiday in Vietnam – something that Jesse didn't really fancy, to say the least. He decided instead, on moral grounds, to evade the bayoneting courses, and fled to Canada.

"It wasn't an immediate decision; I thought about it awhile, but it didn't take me too long to decide. I asked advice of people I respected and I'd say it took me two weeks to come to the decision. I didn't know anything about Canada, so I looked it up in reference books to find out which were the larger cities and how many provinces there were, and so forth, and in this book it said that Montreal was the largest city, so I went there. Anyway, it sounded like the most cosmopolitan, and it is."

Jesse's first musical venture in Montreal was to join a French-Canadian dance group, a short-lived, but interesting collaboration. "Well, I tried to find a straight job at first but I couldn't, so I answered an advertisement in the paper saying that a guitar player was needed – simple as that. It was a good job too – steady; I got \$100 a week every week, which was a godsend. I was with them about six months, during which time I learnt to speak French – ostensibly because none of the guys could speak a word of English, so it was pretty good in that way too."

"The band played some real peculiar gigs ... boy, did I see the wilds! I suppose it was good in a way, but I got awfully depressed. Our name was the Astronauts, by the way, and I left because the manager wanted us to dress up in leotards with silver lame, a bikini thing, and a kind of football helmet with antennae. So, in my newly adopted tongue, I bade them 'au revoir.'"

"While I was with that band, however, I met loads of other musicians, which was another fringe benefit, and we got together another kind of R&B band, and this was actually a nice little band called the John Cold Water Group. We played a little too jazzy and little too loud for the commercial jobs that we got, though, and finally had to break up because we couldn't make any money at it. We played rhythm'n'blues, y'know, Sam & Dave, Otis Redding, and Ray Charles. I was singing and playing guitar, and we had some really good musicians in that band, all of whom are still making good music. Anyway, after that I went on my own, because I was so fed up with the strictures of life in a band."

It had been in Canada that Jesse first started to write his own material, and his decision to go solo gave him a chance to play it. An introduction to Robbie Robertson of the Band, and a subsequent record contract followed with smooth inevitability.



“I met Robbie Robertson in about 1969, I think, in Ottawa. At that point I had written some songs and this friend of mine, who was a deserter from the American army, brought this two-track Ampex recorder up from the States, and we were making a demo tape in the basement of this church. Well, a guy named Gordon Shepherd who was a friend of the guy I was living with brought Robbie down. The Band had just recorded ‘Big Pink’ so I was really impressed. Well anyway he suggested I make a demo tape, which he would take to Albert Grossman ... and that’s what happened.”

The results of all this was Jesse Winchester’s debut album, just titled ‘JESSE WINCHESTER,’ released in 1970 on the Ampex label, produced by Robbie Robertson and engineered by studio wizard Todd Rundgren.

“We did about ten days to two weeks of recording, then we took the tapes home, listened to them, decided what we liked and what we didn’t like, and then came back and did about three more days of revisions and additions. Then Robbie and Todd mixed it – I don’t know where they mixed it – I think it was New York, I wasn’t in on the mix.”

Debut albums often number among the best of any month’s record releases, but Jesse Winchester’s first has got to be among the most beautifully poignant, warm and inspiring debuts I’ve ever heard. Ed Ward in ‘Rolling Stone’ wrote ecstatically about it saying that “every patriotic American should listen to Jesse Winchester, the man who loved it and left it, because his songs transcend all barriers with the exception of one: art.” Melody Maker’s Richard Williams was about the first journalist over here to discover him, predicting that “if his first album is anything to go by, Winchester will be a giant before long.” (It didn’t get released over here until very recently, by the way). Our man Dadomo has discussed the album, along with the two subsequent releases, at great length in the aforementioned article in ZZ48, and as I agree almost totally with his sentiments I will dwell on this most exquisite of albums no longer, except to say that opening track on side two, “Yankee Lady,” reduces me to warm jelly and leaves me grinning like an idiot. (Ed: I often wonder why you look like that).

Winchester's next album, 'THIRD DOWN, 110 TO GO,' arrived approximately two years later, apparently having taken most of that time to make. It's produced by Jesse himself except for three tracks which came from an earlier session produced by Todd Rundgren.

"We tried to make an album, Todd and me. And we did make an album, but it just didn't really work apart from the three tracks I used. Todd comes from a sort of Who tradition, if there is a tradition there, and I'm older than that, and it just didn't work that well. But I think the world of Todd – he's gotta be one of the most talented people I know. So it's no kind of bad reflection on him, it's just the combination."

The critics went suitably potty about the album, which unlike its predecessor did get a fairly immediate release over here. It didn't really move in vast quantities, although in the States it's supposed to have sold more than 100,000 copies. Jesse is, of course, unable to risk returning to the States for fear of being thrown in the draft dodger's penitentiary, so he's never had the opportunity to play there on his own and capitalize on his fairly substantial cult figure status.

By way of digression (for all of you sports fans), the title 'Third Down, 110 To Go' concerns Canadian football. "The title plays on the difference between Canadian and American football. In American football the field is 100 yards long and in Canadian football it's 110. And in American football you get four chances, or four downs, to move the ball ten yards, whereby another ten yards, and so on. In Canadian football you only have three downs to make ten yards, so if it's third down and 110 to go, it means you're all the way up the other end of the field and it's your last chance. So it's sort of a desperate situation. If you were in America playing American football you'd be behind your own goal line." So much for the theories about the title being a reference to the third album having been recorded (the second being the abortive attempt with Rundgren), leaving only 110 to go before the expiry of his contract!

Two other points of interest concerning 'Third Down.' Firstly it contains the legendary "Midnight Bus" mentioned at the beginning of this article, and secondly it features the exemplary guitar work of Amos Garrett for whom Jesse (and every knowledgeable guitar freak I know) holds the highest regard.

"Todd brought him along to some of those sessions we did; that's how I met him. I don't know what to say about Amos' playing. It's just ... the best. A musician's musician, as they say."

In between albums, Jesse continued his modest career of gigging around Canada either alone or with small groups, the most notable of which was called 'Jesse Winchester and The Rhythm Aces' – consisting of drummer Butch McDade and bassist Jeff Davis. When they finally parted company with Jesse they became the Amazing Rhythm Aces along with Barry 'Byrd' Burton, Billy Earhart, James Hooker and Russell Smith, and if you remember, they had a rather large hit in America last year with a song written by Russell Smith called "Third Rate Romance." Smith is the group's principal songwriter (and a very good one at that), and through his association with McDade and Davis, Jesse became aware of him and recorded two of his songs on his own album 'LEARN TO LOVE IT.'

One of the songs was "Third Rate Romance" ... and while another Winchester album rode waves of critical acclaim that seemed to work in inverse proportion to sales figures, Jesse sat back and watched, with a wry smile, as the Amazing Rhythm Aces version of "Third Rate Romance" sailed into the charts approximately one year later. One suspects that his total lack of commercial success doesn't worry Winchester that much (although he says it would enable him to live more comfortably and be able to buy some much needed recording equipment): he's not exactly a prolific writer and four albums in over six years, however good, are hardly enough to keep one bubbling in publicity.

“I’m really slow. I’m naturally lazy, plus I haven’t been tremendously successful in financial terms, so there’s not an awful lot of pressure from the company for me to produce more records ... and without that pressure I don’t do anything, I just sit around.”

So Jesse Winchester cruises along ... doing very little except making fabulous records, as his new one (again two years after its predecessor) proves convincingly. Titled ‘LET THE ROUGH SIDE DRAG,’ it consists of eleven Winchester originals plus a Hill/Schroeder song called “It Takes More Than A Hammer and Nails to Make a House a Home.” There’s the typical mixture of beautifully controlled rock numbers, interspersed with the more characteristic ballads that Jesse is such a craftsman at writing and performing. “Lay Down Your Burden,” “Blow On Chilly Wind,” “How About You” and “As Soon As I Get On My Feet” are exceptionally good songs bearing all the Winchester trademarks of unpretentiousness, earthiness, simplicity, warmth and genuine poignancy. It is definitely a superior album and one that will remain a favourite of mine for a long time. A fair number of local Montreal musicians were used on the album, including three people who are currently in his band and accompanied him over here earlier this year: Marty Harris (bass), Chris Castle (drums) and Bobby Cohen (guitar).

“Marty and I have been together for about a year, and the other two guys came along last November. This is by far the best band I’ve had, and they all have their own musical lives, so I imagine that it’ll be the longest lasting. I have no intention of changing. They all write music themselves and they play with other people, so they’re not gonna get bored.”

I don’t mind saying that I was more than a little disappointed that I didn’t get to see or hear Jesse very well at Dingwalls. The place was so insufferably cramped with genuine fans and tedious posers squashed side by side that it became too much of an ordeal to try and derive any enjoyment out of the proceedings. I fought my way to the temporary position from where I saw him perform one and a half numbers which sounded well up to scratch and then I was forced to beat a hasty retreat to the bar, bruised and bewildered. Never mind though, the ice is broken so to speak, and I’m sure he’ll be back for future visits now that he knows there’s a following for him over here. Once he starts seeing his name crop up in a few Zigzag polls he’ll be over here like a shot!

And that really is basically the Jesse Winchester story to date. Apart from the draft-dodging episode, his career has been decidedly unspectacular – devoid of the serious business hassles, personality clashes, debauched lifestyles and other eccentricities that seem to characterise the world of contemporary music. The most important and rewarding side of Jesse Winchester’s make-up is his ability to write songs of the caliber of “Yankee Lady,” “The Brand New Tennessee Waltz” and “Biloxi” – songs that have been admired and covered by people like Tim Hardin and Brewer & Shipley (“Yankee Lady”); The Everly Brothers and Joan Baez (“The Brand New Tennessee Waltz”); and Tom Rush and Ian Matthews (“Biloxi”). Also, none other than Wilson Pickett recorded a Jesse Winchester song called “Isn’t That So,” and a country singer called Stoney Edwards has apparently adopted Jesse as one of his writers.

True, his enforced exile from his own country has given him a perspective on America that few writers possess and even now it still gives him an identity that adds fuel to his cult figure status. As from 1972 he became a Canadian citizen, and the now considers Canada his home.

“You become a character or something, you know, and people hang all these concepts on you. But in reality I’m not weeping over Mississippi or anything like that. I don’t have any more nostalgia for my old home-town than you do for yours, it’s just the same thing; you can’t go back to your childhood, no-one can. Even though I’m legally constrained from going back to the United States, it really doesn’t make much difference to me, thank God. The way the Lord gives this selective amnesia, it’s really a blessing.”