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APPROXIMATELY 286 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD LISTEN TO JESSE WINCHESTER



By Giovanni Daddomo

If you've been a reader of Zigzag for as long as I have, i.e., since very early on, you'll recall how at the start there weren't too many interviews, most of the features being of the type now more often found in the younger fan magazines such as Fat Angel, Omaha Rainbow, Hot Wacks et al, that is, extended eulogies of a band/singer garnished with whatever biographical information the authors were/are able to glean from their subjects' press offices.

I'd like to revert to that praiseworthy (if wanting) form in the case of Jesse Winchester because (a) I doubt if enough people are familiar enough with Jesse's work for an extended interview to be warranted at this time, and (b) because he wasn't in when I phoned him.

Anyway, that's the waffle taken care of, so let's progress without further ado to....

THE SKIMPY BIOGRAPHY

Jesse was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1945. He was a musical infant, playing piano by the time he was six and organ in the local church by the time he was twelve.

In 1959 Jesse discovered rock'n'roll, got himself a cheap guitar and joined a group on the strength of the three chords he learned the same day he bought the guitar. His heroes at this time were Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Jesse played the local clubs, bars, dancehalls and college circuits with various bands and eventually (1967) ended up in Hamburg with a now forgotten band.

Jesse's trip to Hamburg coincided with the arrival of his draft papers – which, as you may recall, was the equivalent of an invitation to play soldiers in Vietnam; Jesse did what any sane young man would do in the face of such an invitation – he split for Canada. And he's been there ever since.

But Jesse's self-imposed exile did a lot more for him than save his body from target practice – it also proved to be the place where he could flower from faceless backing guitarist into one of the finest singer-songwriters to emerge in the last five years.

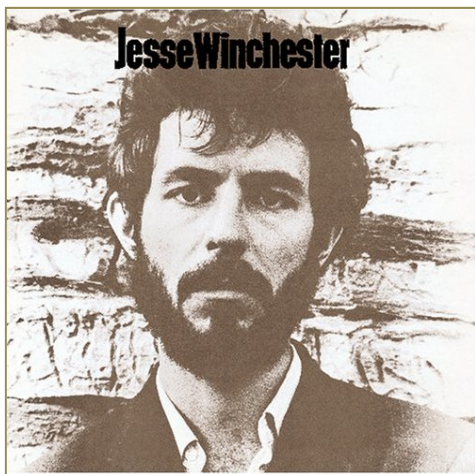
Here's how it happened!

When he first arrived in Montreal, Jesse found himself at an immediate disadvantage; for a start, he couldn't speak French, and secondly, there weren't that many vacancies for American rock guitarists. Nevertheless Jesse soon found a gig with a French-Canadian dance band. The collaboration didn't last too long because of the obvious incompatibility of both music and ethnic background but it was the spur that convinced Jesse that he ought to try going it alone.

It can't have been too easy at first (or ever would be, as there are only a handful of places to play in Montreal), but Jesse eventually built up both a repertoire and a following.

Jesse's break came when he supported The Band – Robbie Robertson was impressed enough by Jesse's vocal and writing talents to help him get a recording contract, eventually flying up to Canada to produce the album himself.

Which takes care of most of the skimpy biography and leads to the records:



(1) JESSE WINCHESTER
(Ampex – deleted)

The deleted Ampex album had a fold-out sleeve which had on each of its four faces the same picture of Jesse – a bleached sepia shot (head and shoulders) of a serious-looking young man, shirtless and in what appears to be a very old suit-jacket; the effect is rather like those pictures of dustbowl farmers taken during the Depression and /or stills of Henry Fonda in “The Grapes Of Wrath”. I mention the sleeve not only because it's a very good one but because my copy of the album doesn't fold out – apparently Ampex folded shortly after the record came out and the

Canadian issue was on the Bearsville label (BR 2045/0629). So anyone who's been trying to get a copy on import, and has been told about the Ampex deletion, is advised to ask their import shop to get in touch with Bearsville in Canada.

The album was produced, as I've already said by Robbie Robertson, with Todd Rundgren as engineer. The instrumentation was divided up as follows: Winchester (vocals, gtr, piano), Robertson (guitar), Levon Helm (drums, mandolin), Bob Boucher (Fender and upright electric bass), David Rea (gtrs, vibes, vcls), Ken Pearson (piano, organ, vibes), David Lewis (drums), Guy Black (drums), and Al Cherney (violin).

As you may imagine from the line-up listed above, not everybody credited could possibly have played on every track (the drummers alone would out-percuss Blue Cheer!), but despite the shuffling of personnel, the record's a remarkably cohesive work.

The opening cut "Payday" is a full-tilt rocker with tinkling piano, slippery guitar and appropriately simple but very forceful drumming. It's not typical Winchester, nor even typical of what's to follow on the album, but then it's no easy task to say what is typical Winchester – suffice it to say that it's a fine attention grabber. The lyrics are pure rock'n'roll, about getting paid, drinking and dancing with a young lady who's 'got a heart as big as your mama's stove and body like Brigitte Bardot.'

Jesse's beautiful tenor vocals lose their rock edge for the gentle "Biloxi"; accompanied by watery piano and acoustic guitar Jesse paints an idyllic picture of pretty girls swimming in the sea as the sun sets over New Orleans and he takes his girl for a walk by the ocean and then a swim (naked, because they want to) – which sounds a bit schmaltzy written down but it's a beautifully evocative song and even the surf noises gently brushed cymbals work perfectly.

The full electric band comes back in for "Snow," a humorous comment on Canadian weather co-authored by Robertson. It begins: 'I was tuning in the 6 o'clock newscast, when the weatherman mentioned snow / As soon as I heard that four-letter word, I was making my plans to go.' It's a very catchy tune and I sing it all the time. The playing's fine too.

"The Brand New Tennessee Waltz" has been covered by Joan Baez ('Blessed Are ...' LP), and the Everly Brothers on 'Stories We Could Tell,' But neither match Jesse's original. It really is a waltz, but it's a beautiful tune given a strong country (as opposed to Strauss?) feel by tasteful use of violin and mandolin. The lyrics are superficially about a wandering Romantic, but they're also the words of a man who is genuinely homesick: 'Oh my but you have a pretty face, you favour a girl that I knew / I imagine that she's still in Tennessee, and by God I should be there too... I've a sadness too sad to be true,' and the end reveals the wanderer to be an outlaw: "So have all of your passionate violins play a tune for a Tennessee kid, who's feeling like leaving another town / with no place to go if he did / 'cause they'll catch you wherever you're hid.' It's a classic song achieving, as the Band did with "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" among others, a feeling that's both timeless and quintessentially American without ever seeming contrived in the manner of such embarrassments as say, "Billy Don't Be A Hero."

Side One ends with "That's A Touch I Like," a jaunty little rocker with a similar feel and line-up as 'Payday.' It also has a bass line that's right out of 'March Of The Mods,' but not, I hasten to add, all the way through.

"Yankee Lady" ties with '...Tennessee Waltz' as the album's finest; it's a mid-paced gentle love story recounted against acoustic guitar and mandolin backings along with percussion that's so restrained it's positively polite. I'd rank it alongside Tim Hardin's "Lady Came From Baltimore" and Love's "Andmoreagin" as one of my favorite love songs – need I say more?

"The Skip Rope Song" is almost as simple as the title suggests. Using similar instrumentation to "Biloxi," the song recalls a childhood love and comes to terms with an adult love at the same time

and maybe it is just a little bit too sweet for most palates, but it's quite an engaging little melody for all that. And if you don't like it there's only just over two minutes of it, so why worry?

"Rosy Shy" is an unrequited love song with a positively ominous chorus line: '... and I can't find grace in the human face today.' Echoes of Dylan and Hardin in lyric and melody respectively leading out via a drone from the violin.

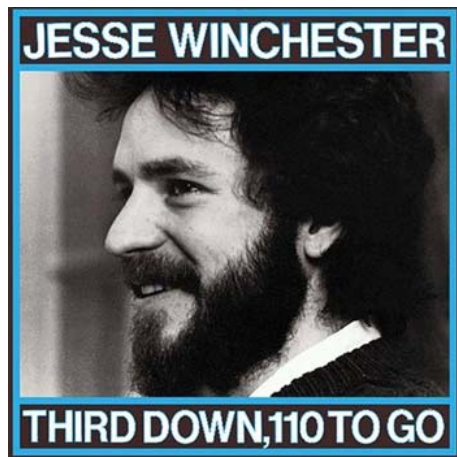
If "Rosy Shy" is ominous in parts then its successor, "Black Dog" is positively chilling. It's just a song about a dog really, but moody piano and upright bass behind lines like: 'Black Dog don't believe in sin / think of where he's been today,' tend to conjure up images a lot closer to the Hounds of The Baskervilles than Rin Tin Tin. Truly weird, this one.

The album closes with "The Nudge," an infectious stomper built around a simple but very attractive guitar riff with lyrics that are as deliciously ambiguous as "Roll With Me Henry."

All of which I'm sure doesn't even begin to do justice to one of the best debut albums by any performer you'd care to mention, if not one of the finest albums by anybody to appear in 1970.

A lot of critics said basically the same thing at the time but, as so often happens, this didn't lead to overnight success for Jesse, as the album's subsequent deletion testifies. Still, if you can get hold of one, please do – you'll be making a long-term investment you won't regret.

Between mid-1970 and the Autumn of '72 which saw the release of a second album, Jesse continued to play small clubs for small sums. Meanwhile other artists began to pick up on the first album and, as well as the cover versions already mentioned, Tim Hardin did "Yankee Lady" and in case you're interested, Ian Hunter borrowed Guy Stevens' copy and still hasn't returned it...



(2) THIRD DOWN, 110 TO GO
(Bearsville BR2102 0598)

Unlike its predecessor, Jesse's second album did get a UK release (although the only copies I've seen are US pressings selling at UK prices). It appeared in the States in mid-October of '72 and had apparently been some twenty months in the making. Three tracks were produced by Todd Rundgren and the remainder by Jesse himself. It's a lot less rockier than 'Jesse Winchester' but is, in retrospect a better recording. His lyrics are simpler, as in the instrumentation overall, and the quality of the vocals on the ten self-produced tracks suggests that Jesse is his own best producer.

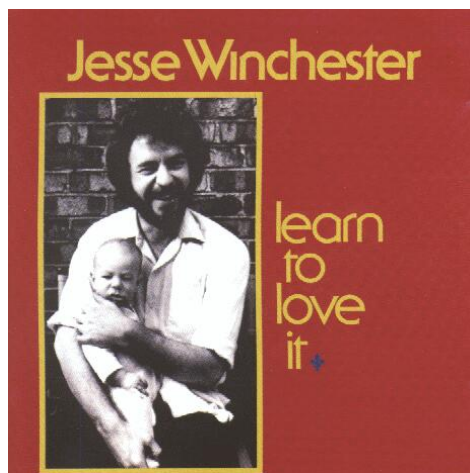
The supporting musicians are: Amos Garrett (gtr, vcls), Andre Benichou and Doug Schmolze (gtrs), Charles Viber (violin), Gord Flem yng (piano), three bass players: Bob Boucher, Jimmy Oliver, and Gene Cotton. N.D. Smart and Ron Frankel (drums), Sam Kelly (conga, bongos), and Don Abrams (percussion).

The title (which is the first line of a short poem on the back cover) refers to Canadian football; being no expert on the game I couldn't tell you what it means in tactical terms but I do know it means things don't look too hot. This implied despair is underlined by the back cover photo of Jesse holding his head as if he's just seen the gas bill. Which is maybe a slightly facile way of saying that the album's not the melancholy downer that some of the packaging and title suggest. My copy also had a leaflet tucked in the seal which tells you what a wonderful record you're buying. It reads a bit like an ad for washing machines but it's reasonably informative and quite honest about the record's content.

As I've already limped my way through the first album track by track, I don't see much point in repeating the exercise, so here's a brief resume; the strongest of the Rundgren tracks as far as an instant appeal goes is "Midnight Bus" – a number that should be familiar to Chilli Willi fans as the Willis do a particularly fine version of it onstage. New departures are Jesse's newly-mastered flute, which features splendidly on a number of tracks and, as I've said already, an improvement of the vocals' texture. There are fewer love songs and in their place comes a continuation of the first album's bittersweet homespun philosophies. "Do It" for example, is a delicious little tidbit of a song (1:28) with the chorus: "Do it 'til you're sick of it / do it 'til you can't do it no more." There's also an instrumental, "Lullaby For The First Born" which Jesse wrote in anticipation of the son his lady bore him soon after it was written – Jesse hums the melody along with flute and violin. Once again it may sound schmaltzy in print but it's a beautiful little tune. God turns up again in "Isn't That So?" another amusing dialogue with a catchy melody, whilst "North Star" starts out as what could be a serious philosophical enquiry but comes delightfully back to earth with the enquiry: 'Does the world have a belly button? / I can't get this out of my head / if it turns up in my back yard, I'll tickle it so hard / That the whole world will laugh to wake the dead ...'

It's a gentle record, thoughtful, warm and often humorous; the melodies are strong, the lyrics and playing wonderfully concise (Amos Garrett's electric guitar in particular) and it's great to charm the rain away. Maybe I'm getting old, but I get the feeling again and again when I listen to this man's albums (and this one in particular) that I'm sharing the room with an adult – by which I mean no insult to children, merely that most of the records I get seem to be the product of rather confused adolescents of various ages.

More silence (except a rumoured UK visit that never came off) until September of this year when a fresh album appeared in the shops.



(3) LEARN TO LOVE IT
(Bearsville 6953 0698)

This one will, I'm assured, be released, but as year it hasn't been scheduled by Warner Bros, the UK distributors, so it probably, won't be available until mid-January.

'Rolling Stone' seems to have taken up Jesse as some kind of political mascot at least that was the underlying tone of the interview they published in RS 170. Surely now that Mr. Ford has given the draft dodgers a conditional pardon Jesse would want to go home? Apparently not – Jesse's replies were mostly negative, he'd learnt to love Canada and was happy there he said. Almost predictably, the review of the album, when it appeared worked on the premise that Jesse wasn't writing good songs anymore now that he wasn't pissed off with the good old USA.

But it wasn't only the fact that I could see it coming that pissed me off about the review, it was the reviewer's assumption that his own interpretation of Jesse's work had not fulfilled its promise.

Anyway, all cattiness aside, 'Learn To Love It' is not great disappointment – far from it. In fact, and despite what he said in the RS interview, there's probably more nostalgia in this record than on either of the others; on the first side there's "L'Air De La Louisiane" one of the album's two songs sung in French (thus neatly coming to terms with both the lost and gained paradises); it's a sad ballad and the lyrics I can decipher with my schoolboy French (it didn't help with Clifton Chenier either) are about walking with a girl in 'the Louisiana air.' Directly afterwards comes "Mississippi You're On My Mind" one of Jesse's finest songs and a sure-fire candidate for the next Joan Baez album. It's slow and sad and beautifully put together. There's a lot more nostalgia inherent in the traditional (although Jesse gets the composer's credit) "Laisse Les Bons Temps Rouler" – this one gets the full Cajun treatment and the only complaint I'd make is that you can't **not** dance to it, lovely stuff. Then there's three gospel songs: Jesse's own "Wake Me" which isn't actually gospel, but is certainly structured that way, Martha Carson's "I Can't Stand Up Alone" which closes the album and is done a cappella, and most important of all the traditional "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," a call and reply song (the reply is: 'Poor man's friend') to which Jesse has added this verse of his own: 'Cause in the year of 1967 as a somewhat younger man / the call to bloody glory came and I would not raise my hand / 'cause I'm baptized by water so I pass the one by fire / but if you wanna fight go on and fight if that be your desire / That's why I like Pierre Trudeau / Good Got Almighty that's the poor man's friend.'

And that's only scraping the surface as the rest of the album's just as superb as the two predecessors.

Oh, by the way, Jesse's got another kid now, he's holding it on the front cover (where there's also a fleur de lys) and he looks almost as happy as he makes me with his records.

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Giovanni Dadomo  
*(with special thanks to John Du Castel without  
whose help the biography would've been a lot skimpier)*

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