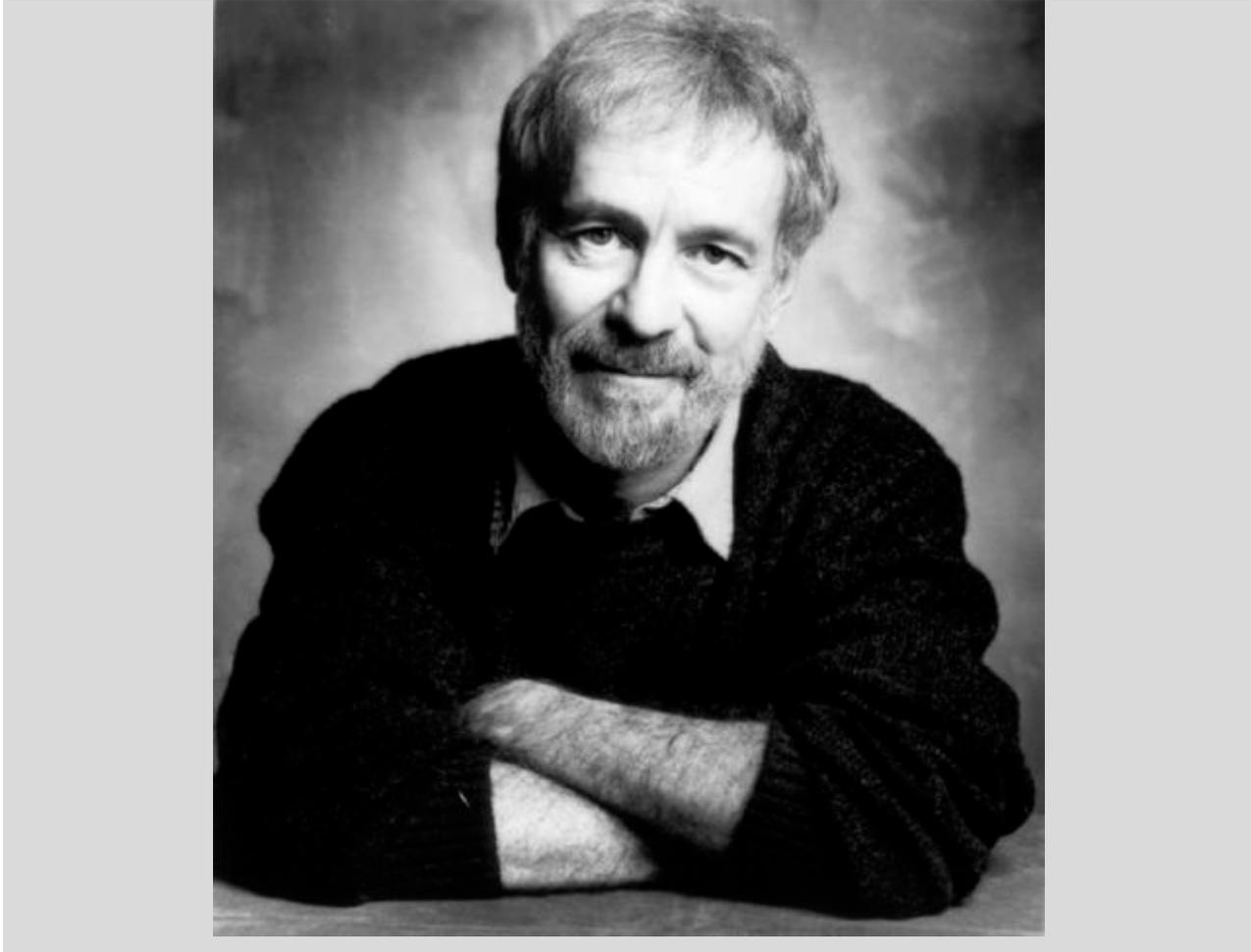


Winchester builds on legacy as songwriter

By Mark Jordan
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In a career that has spanned more than 40 years, Jesse Winchester has been responsible for making some beautiful music.

The “Brand New Tennessee Waltz,” from his 1970 eponymous debut, for instance, has a melody to rival that of its namesake, making it a longtime favorite of vocalists like Joan Baez and the Everly Brothers.

But in any article written about Winchester, his music invariably plays second fiddle to an incident that occurred when he was a young man, before he was a highly respected singer-songwriter. In 1967, Winchester joined the ranks of approximately 100,000 draft-eligible young men who fled the United States during the Vietnam War to avoid selective service.

“I don’t like it, but you make your bed and you lie in it,” says Winchester of his notoriety. “I’d rather the focus be on the music, but like I said, that’s my problem.”

In recent years Winchester, free from the onus of being a fugitive from the law, has been slowly, steadily building a case for his legacy as a songwriter, one of the great -- if under-heralded -- Southern troubadours.

Born in 1944 in Shreveport, La., where his father had been stationed during World War II, James Ridout Winchester lived his early years in a succession of Mississippi hamlets as the elder Winchester tried to make a go of farming. It was during these years that young Winchester, forced to take piano lessons by his mother, first took up music, eventually earning a spot as church organist.

When Winchester was 12, his father suffered a heart attack, gave up farming, and moved the family to his hometown of Memphis, where he joined the family law firm. It was here that the Christian Brothers High School student's musical aspirations took hold. He took up the guitar and entertained dreams of becoming the next Steve Cropper.

"Late at night when I was supposed to be doing my homework, I was listening to Dewey Phillips along with everybody else," Winchester says. "When I was in high school kids would form different garage bands, and we'd play at church functions, youth groups, that kind of stuff. And I was in the school band with Ralph Hale. He was a legendary band director. I was really, really lucky to have him as a teacher."

In 1962, Winchester enrolled in the exclusive Williams College in Massachusetts, where he studied German and was expected ultimately to follow in his father's footsteps and join the bar. But then, as the saying goes, the '60s happened. After graduating college in 1966, Winchester traveled in Europe and played for a time in a German garage band. While there he received his draft notice.

By this time, Winchester's father was deceased. So after discussing the matter with his mother, Winchester left for Montreal, Canada, arriving with \$300 and an electric guitar. The effects of his decision to evade the draft, a felony under U.S. law, still haunt Winchester, especially the personal disappointments of people like his grandfather, with whom he was unable to reconcile before his death.

"I'm sorry about that," Winchester says. "I don't regret what I did. It's not so much a personal regret as it is a generational-type of regret. I think as a group we sort of went overboard in our opposition to the war and we wound up offending the very people we should have been trying to court. That was a big mistake. I think people are trying to correct that nowadays with the war in Iraq. The people who are against that war are trying to be very careful to differentiate between the people who are making the policies they disagree with and the soldiers who carry them out."

The irony is that in Canada Winchester was able to launch his music career. Canadian Robbie Robertson of the Band quickly befriended him and produced his 1970 debut album. *Jesse Winchester* has a melancholy, elegiac tone -- carried through in lyrics which emphasize Winchester's woe as a displaced Southerner -- that has made it a cult favorite for singer-songwriter fans since its limited release.

But despite raves for his work, Winchester was limited by his inability to tour the United States. President Jimmy Carter pardoned all U.S. draft dodgers in 1977, but by then, the singer-songwriter boom of the early '70s had been supplanted by punk and disco.

Winchester continued to write and record, and his music increasingly found its way onto others' records. Over the years his songs have been covered by the likes of Elvis Costello ("Payday"), Waylon Jennings ("Defying Gravity"), Emmylou Harris

("My Songbird"), Reba McEntire ("You Remember Me"), Jimmy Buffet ("Biloxi"), Jerry Jeff Walker ("Mississippi, You're On My Mind"), Wilson Pickett, and the Weather Girls ("Well-A-Wiggy").

Winchester took most of the '90s off to focus on raising a family that includes three children. He resurfaced in 1999 to make *Gentleman of Leisure*, his last album to date. Produced by Nashville Dobro master Jerry Douglas, the record allowed Winchester to meet his high school guitar idol for the first time.

"I had this song that mentioned Steve Cropper in the lyrics, and Jerry was like, 'Why don't we get Steve to play on it?'" Winchester recalls of the sessions. "I didn't realize he was living in Nashville now. It was surreal. I was in the control room listening and I was like, 'Wow, that sounds like Steve Cropper.' He's such a great guy. All he wanted was a bottle of wine for his fee."

Winchester currently lives in Charlottesville, Va., where he can be close to his children and grandchildren. He also has finished writing material for a new album and at the age of 63 has rediscovered the joy of performing live.

"The reason I stopped performing was I just was completely burned out," says Winchester. "When I started up again I was just having a wonderful time, so I'm still doing it. I don't know what happened.... Age probably. Age does some bad things, but it also does some good things. Thank God for that, too."

Jesse Winchester plays at 8 p.m. Saturday at Bartlett Performing Arts and Conference Center, 3663 Appling Road.

Tickets are \$25 at the box office or by phone at (901) 385-6440. For more information, visit bpacc.org.

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