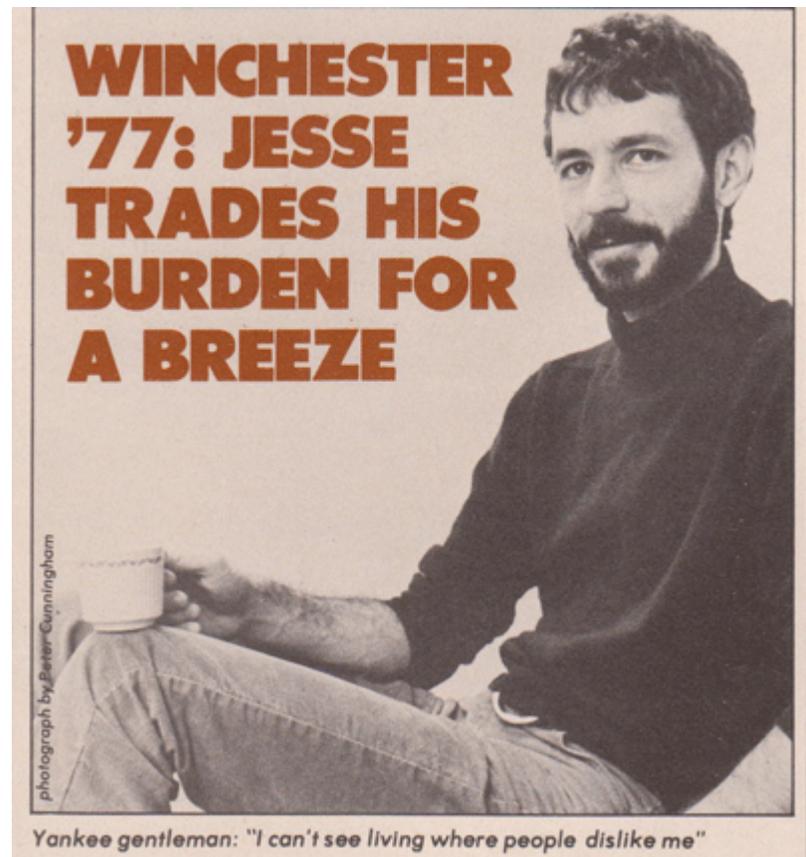


MONTREAL – Hands jammed into his back pockets, Jesse Winchester stands at the window staring holes through the spring snowstorm. Birch logs spit and crack reassuringly in the fireplace while his manager's kitten, Cheesecake, is reportedly under a straw hat that tips mysteriously down the hallway.

Turning his head from the window with a dreary expression, Jesse seems to be feeling what the cover of a Canadian newsmagazine calls “the agony of the English-speaking Quebecker.” Quebec’s French-speaking majority wants to shake off the language (and the economic domination) of the province’s 13% Anglo minority group. But where does that leave a family man and songsmith who exiled himself from the United States in 1967?



“I don’t know. I can’t see living in English Canada. And I can’t see living where people are gonna dislike me because I’m not French. Nobody knows where this thing’s gonna go – when you’re dealing with emotional-cultural issues people can lose their heads and start really going crazy. History’s full of things like that. So I’m just waiting around to see. I don’t want to leave, but the health of my family comes first.”

Since Jimmy Carter has pardoned Vietnam draft evaders, the singer could legally resettle in the U.S.A. Would he consider returning to his boyhood home near Memphis?

“I don’t consider any place in the United States,” Jesse says in a flat, adamant voice. The slight-but-sturdy expatriate’s mouth is a tight line in his brown beard, and his often-laughing eyes are severe behind gold-framed spectacles.

Jesse, 32, lives with his classically pretty wife Leslie (26 and Canadian) on the ground floor of a plain two-story house. When the warm days finally come, they’ll get in his Volvo with James, 5, and Alice, 2, and drive into the Laurentian Mountains to picnic – and maybe look for a country home.

That home will perhaps be “somewhere high on a mountain top, down by the deep blue sea,” as prescribed on the title track of his new *Nothing But A Breeze* album. However strong his fears that Canada’s separatist struggles will exile him for a second time, he has made a record that is joyful and, he hopes, commercial. “I’ve been feeling real positive, so I want to pass it along,” says the man who must rank as one of our best songwriters on the strength of such bittersweet masterpieces as “Yankee Lady,” “Biloxi,” “The Brand New Tennessee Waltz,” and “Mississippi You’re On My Mind.”

Now in the hands of producer Brian Ahern, he's cut a record on which both his touring band and Ahern's sweetening agents (Herb Pedersen, Emmylou Harris and strings) are prominent. "I used to take a more literary approach," says Jesse. "I would just say what I had to and shut up."

Jesse's favorite themes (mortality and remembrance of things past) still invest his new songs, although the push for a wider audience has resulted in the "juvenile" swing-talking "Twigs and Seeds" and the Nashville-sounding "Seems Like Only Yesterday."

What Jesse has to say on record often scans like Chapter and Verse. "I'm sure there'll always be religious imagery in my songs," he allows in a humble, measured tone. "I can never resist talking that way – God, death and all that. The Bible is full of rich language, stories you can refer to. A good percentage of our society is familiar with the Bible – more than any other book. Except maybe "The Joy Of Sex."

The cordial, mannerly Winchester doesn't want to live the prophet's role that his work may imply, although he admits, "I have been known to get preachy." A variety of upbeat songs should enliven the States-crossing tour he's embarked on. "I wanna see California," says Jesse, "I wanna see the crazies and people with green hair."

His status as an adoptive Quebecker, meanwhile, will hang on a diplomatic tug-of-war that "I just landed here in the middle of. I'm not an outsider, but I'm a newcomer for sure."

*-Fred Schuruers
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