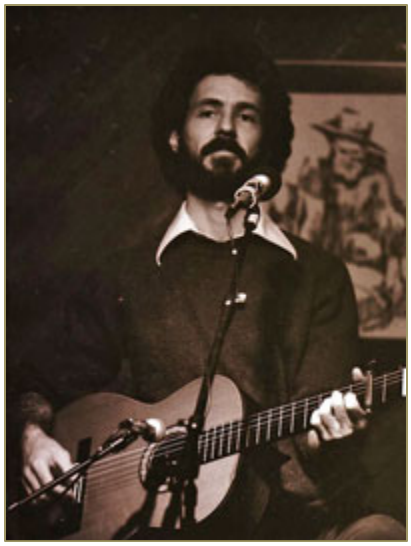
Burlington **Free Press**



Winchester's imprint 'in the hills of old Vermont'

SUSAN GREEN - April 19, 2014

January 20, 1977: On the receiving line at one of President Jimmy Carter's inaugural balls, Barry Bozeman had an ulterior motive beyond the requisite handshake. Then a Colchester resident, he was carrying an album by his friend Jesse Winchester, a prolific singer-songwriter self-exiled in Montreal for a decade.

"When I showed Carter the record, he told me 'That's all taken care of,'" recently recalled Bozeman.

A White House announcement came the next day. An already planned amnesty for young American draft resisters during the Vietnam War would now include those who had changed their citizenship. Winchester, from Tennessee, did that in 1973, six years after seeking refuge in Canada.

To sway the new occupant of the Oval Office, Bozeman had tirelessly worked his considerable Democratic Party connections for months. "We convinced him becoming a citizen (of a host country) was an honorable thing to do," he said.

April 21, 1977: Finally able to return to his homeland, Winchester performed his first-ever major U.S. concert at Memorial Auditorium in Burlington.

Bozeman produced the event, which drew national media attention, partly as a nod to Winchester's local fans. One of his earliest tunes, 1970's "Yankee Lady," served as a kind of anthem for the Green Mountain State thanks to lyrics like these: "I lived with the decent folks in the hills of old Vermont..."

April 11, 2014: Jesse Winchester died of cancer in Virginia at age 69. Even though he was free to live in America again after the 1977 pardon, he had remained in Canada for another quarter-century.

In several interviews with the Burlington Free Press over a 24-year period, Winchester seemed nervous, self-deprecating, shy, gracious, smart and sensitive.

“I think he was as close to the portal of the soul as anyone I’ve ever seen,” suggested Mark Sustic of Fairfax, who had bumped into Winchester at social activities like contra dances.

Other Vermonters who knew him contend that, as often reflected in the music he composed, his melancholy demeanor masked a subtle wit.

“I wouldn’t mind having a No. 1 record,” Winchester acknowledged in 2000. “And I wouldn’t mind winning a Grammy, although you have to be cute to do that. I’m cute, but I could stand to be cuter.”

Vermont, musical roots

Jesse Winchester was a son of the South. He grew up in Memphis, a city his great-great-great grandfather and namesake — James Ridout Winchester — had cofounded. The younger Winchester’s childhood incorporated piano lessons and playing organ in church for five years.

Winchester wound up attending Williams College in Massachusetts but regularly slipped over the Vermont state line to visit his Bennington girlfriend. She was later memorialized as the Yankee Lady in a song with exquisite sense of place: “An autumn walk on a country road/ And a million flaming trees/I was feeling uneasy/ ’Cause there was winter in the breeze...”

Winter proved to be an inescapable reality after Winchester graduated and received a draft notice. “The next stop would have been the Army because I no longer had a student deferment,” he explained in his trademark Tennessee cadence to the Burlington Free Press before a 2000 concert at the University of Vermont.

As it was for thousands of his contemporaries in those days, the war in Indochina seemed immoral to him. Four days before Winchester’s scheduled induction in early January 1967, he purchased a one-way plane ticket to Montreal and flew north with a suitcase, an electric guitar and $200 in his wallet.

The choice to leave was painful. “My poor grandfather, whom I loved and admired, was devastated,” he noted in 2000. “That still bothers me. He was

a gentleman of the old school that believed you should do your patriotic duty."

In Quebec, Winchester changed his first name from James to Jesse. "I figured, 'No one knows me,' so I could start over," he said.

His guitar skills and singing voice were the key to finding work. "I got a job with a bar band that played French cabaret music," Winchester said. "It was so tacky. In those days, groups had to have a gimmick. We were les Astronautes, so our manager decided we should dress in leotards and helmets with antennas, like aliens. I said, 'I don't think so,' and left."

Less an alien than a stranger in a strange land, Winchester had a brief stint with a rhythm-and-blues revue that boasted several go-go girls. He then tried solo gigs "at coffeehouses frequented by hippies and folkies. You were expected to write your own music, so I began doing that."

His first original, "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," revealed a profound yearning — "a sadness too sad to be true" — for the South that would never really dissipate during Winchester's long Canadian sojourn.

Rise and return

Winchester's low-key life changed in 1969, when he met Robbie Robertson, lead guitarist and vocalist with The Band. The Tennessee transplant soon signed with manager Albert Grossman, who also represented Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin.

An eponymous debut album, with Robertson as producer and accompanist, ensued. Levon Helm, drummer for The Band, provided the mandolin on "Yankee Lady."

Other albums followed but sales were not impressive largely because Winchester was unable to tour in the U.S. But his songwriting talent — spanning gospel, country, soul and rock genres — could travel. The likes of Jimmy Buffett, Joan Baez, Tom Rush, Emmylou Harris, Reba McEntire, Wilson Pickett and the Everly Brothers borrowed from the expat's growing repertoire.

Some politicians in the capital city of Jackson reportedly planned to propose Winchester's haunting "Mississippi, You're On My Mind" as the official state song until they discovered the composer had avoided military service.

A few years before taking up residence in Vermont, Barry Bozeman — who had been an outspoken anti-war activist at the University of Tennessee — made his way to Montreal on election eve in November of 1972. He wasn't in

danger of being sent to Vietnam but, as a dedicated Democrat, felt horrified by the impending landslide victory of President Richard Nixon.

“I had a few friends up there and they knew Jesse,” Bozeman said last week. “I used to go to his house often. We’d sit at the kitchen table and drink a little wine. Or we’d play chess.”

In 1974 Bozeman was among a group of about 40 people who began renting the defunct Hotel le Chatelet in Morin Heights, a small Quebec town in the Laurentians. For a year, it functioned as a collective, with the ground-floor bar transformed into a music venue they dubbed the Belladonna Ballroom. Winchester, who spent many long weekends at the place, rehearsed there for his Canadian tours.

By then married with young children, he was playing gigs from Halifax to Vancouver with a band called the Rhythm Aces. Bozeman went along as his soundman and de facto road manager. But America beckoned.

Bozeman moved to Colchester’s Clay Point in 1976 and teamed with a Vermonter named Bill Reilly to form Northern Concert Associates. The company’s first effort was to book Winchester for periodic engagements throughout that year at the Abercorn House, just across the border from Richford.

A proposal was already in progress that would make it possible for him to return to the U.S. A former teenage Senate page for the father of Vice-President Al Gore, Bozeman had begun lobbying his Democratic Party contacts.

“We thought if Carter welcomed Jesse back home, it might have a mending, healing effect on the nation,” Bozeman said in 1977.

On the heels of the subsequent pardon for draft evaders, Carter’s special press assistant Jim Purks told the Burlington Free Press: “One of the President’s desires was to mend and heal.”

It was also helpful that Bozeman handled the sound for southern rockers like the Marshall Tucker Band and Charlie Daniels, both involved in candidate Jimmy Carter’s fundraisers. Both acts also performed at an inaugural ball, giving Bozeman the opportunity to encounter the Chief Executive from Georgia in person.

Simple chords, dreams

A few weeks before Winchester’s 1977 Memorial Auditorium comeback concert, Burlington photographer Carolyn Bates had a chance to train her camera on him at an early April recording session near Woodstock, New

York. She had an assignment to shoot portraits for an alternative Boston weekly, the Real Paper.

“He was such an unbelievably cool, fabulous person,” Bates said. “Jesse was my first real hero.”

President Jimmy Carter ranked as one of Winchester’s heroes. Among the 23 songs he delivered during the April 21 debut in the Queen City, “Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt,” was a Great Depression standard with updated lyrics: “Tell me why you like Jimmy Carter./ Good God Almighty, tell me where to begin...”

And Winchester, fronting a four-piece backup band called Midnight Bus, made it clear that he did not regret his refusal to fight in Vietnam: “‘Cause in the year of nineteen and sixty-seven/ I was a somewhat younger man./ The call to bloody glory came/ And I would not raise my hand...”

“Yankee Lady” got a prolonged standing ovation from the decent folks of old Vermont in the audience. (Asked in 1976 if he’d kept track of the woman who inspired that nostalgic melody, Winchester replied: “Last I heard, she was living in New York City.”)

The Burlington event, preceding a celebration at the Ice House, had enough historical significance to attract press from across the country such as The New York Times, CBS News, and Playboy. Rolling Stone magazine was there, as well, later deeming Winchester “the greatest voice of the decade.”

After all the hoopla of the Memorial Auditorium show, everyone anticipated Winchester was destined for bountiful success. “That never materialized,” he said following one of his October 1979 solo shows at Hunt’s, a Burlington club on Lower Main Street. “The problem was that I didn’t want it bad enough. A lot about it embarrassed me. You can’t feel that way and make it in this business, I guess.”

Chico Lager of Williston, who co-owned Hunt’s, remembers Winchester as “an incredibly quiet, reserved, polite, unpretentious guy, not full of himself, not an exuberant person.”

Exuberant or not, Winchester continued to tour America, record more albums (he leaves behind 14 in total) and write tunes that were sometimes whimsical but mostly real heartbreakers. His deep emotional truths and keen observations were graced by a decidedly plaintive style.

“I prefer very simple chord changes and romantic themes,” he said in 1976.

“Jesse was the most minimalist guitarist I’ve ever heard,” recalled Montpelier resident Mark Greenberg, who was director of the Onion River

Arts Council when he booked Winchester for a 1986 solo concert at the Barre Opera House. “At some point, we drove around the city listening to my cassette tape of Ray Charles and talking about how much we loved his music.”

But Winchester began an 11-year hiatus from live performances and new releases in the late 1980s. “Most of my income came from writing songs for other people,” he said in early 2000, while living on the Quebec side of Lake Memphremagog. “I got very fed up with touring and my records never sold much, so I took stock.”

Nonetheless, Winchester returned to the fold with a 1999 album, “Gentleman of Leisure.” And in February of the following year, he headlined a benefit at Ira Allen Chapel organized by Mark Sustic of Fairfax, whose son Tom was battling leukemia.

“I’d previously spent some time with Jesse when he played the Champlain Valley Folk Festival in the 1980s,” Sustic said.

In 2001, Winchester performed again at the folk festival. One of the local people who made that happen was Robert Resnik, host of “All the Traditions” on Vermont Public Radio.

“He was supremely talented and gave us so many beautiful songs,” Resnik pointed out. “I found him really easy to work with, even though he was marvelously twitchy in his own particular way.”

The twitchy troubadour from Memphis mused in 1979 that “fame doesn’t interest me at all, but I would like to make enough money to build a studio and maybe go sailing.”

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