

Crossroads to Freedom Interview
Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee
November 19, 2010



Bradley Bledsoe: On behalf of crossroads to freedom and Rhodes College, I would like to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Bradley Bledsoe, a senior at Rhodes College.

Emma Fiandt: And I'm Emma Fiandt, a junior at Rhodes College.

Bradley Bledsoe: And we are honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the crossroads to freedom website.

Emma Fiandt: Okay, let's get started with some basic biographical information. Can you state your name please?

Jesse Winchester: My real name, or legal name, is James Redue Winchester. Jesse, I usually go by Jesse.

Emma Fiandt: And if you don't mind telling us, what year were you born?

Jesse Winchester: What year? 1944.

Emma Fiandt: And where were you born at and raised?

Jesse Winchester: I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and I was raised – except for the first 12 years of my life in Mississippi, I was raised in Memphis.

Emma Fiandt: Can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in here in Memphis?

Jesse Winchester: Well, I – kind of all over the place, but we would up in Germantown, and Germantown in those days was a very small farming town. It wasn't anything like it is now. And that's where I grew up, I guess.

Emma Fiandt: What was it like growing up in Germantown?

Jesse Winchester: It was great. It was, you know, barefoot boy with cheeks of time kind of thing. We had horses, and we just ran wild. We had a great time. It was a great place to be a kid. As I say, it was country then, farms, and that's sort of the boyhood that I had.

Emma Fiandt: Do you have any specific memories from that time that influenced you later on in your life?

Jesse Winchester: Well, yeah, I guess the whole experience. I was the organist at church, and that was kind of interesting for me, in a directed – it was a very small church, and it really says more for the lack of – for the miniscule talent pool than it does for how gifted a musician I was, the fact that I became the

organist and the choir director. And it was me and several teenage girls who were the choir. And that was good.

I enjoyed living the country life. I enjoyed – I would take care of the neighbors' livestock, bring in the cows at night, all that kind of, you know, country type stuff. I enjoyed that. I remember it fondly. But as far as specific things, no. I can remember when I was – I went to retrieve a fishing lure that had snagged on the bottom of a lake, and almost cut my little toe off. I had to walk all the way into Germantown with my bleeding toe. I remember that. But no, nothing really that blows the ark out of the water.

Emma Fiandt: Okay. Did you go to high school here in Memphis?

Jesse Winchester: I did, I went to CBC – what we called CBC, and now it's CBHS. And when I went there, it was on East Parkway, which is now the college. And that's where I went to high school.

Emma Fiandt: What did you do after you left high school?

Jesse Winchester: Then I went to a Williams College, which is a small liberal arts school in Massachusetts. And I took a couple of years off and went to the University of Munich, in Germany. And then I came back and finished my degree at Williams.

Emma Fiandt: Did you study music there, or - ?

Jesse Winchester: No, I studied languages. I majored in German. I really was not a scholar. I had no real business going to college. I was taking up valuable space for someone who was a good scholar. But in those days, you see, we were trying to stay out of the Army, a lot of us were, and to do that you needed to stay in school. So I stayed in school.

Emma Fiandt: Do you remember a point at which integration, or segregation, played a role in your life? Like, specifically during high school or college?

Jesse Winchester: I do. In fact, that whole issue has been a permanent part of my life. It goes on to this day. William Faulkner said that southern life is defined by race, and I'm a witness. I can remember when I was a little boy in Mississippi, we would take gift baskets around to the – to our neighbors, our black neighbors.

And maybe I was five or six years old, my mom and I – my mom would pull the car up in front of one neighbor's house and said, "Now, Jimmy, you go in and take this gift box to the Johnsons," or whoever it was. And I was nervous and shy, and I said, "Well, what do I do? Do I ask for Mr. Johnson?" She said, "Oh, no, no, you don't call him 'mister,' you just say 'Bob,'" or whoever it was. And I thought, "Well, that's funny. Why don't I call him mister? And I didn't go into it there, although I did raise the question.

But I think momma just said, "Well, that's the way it is." And that's my first memory of that, because growing up in Mississippi, all my school – not the school children, my playmates were black kids.

The only neighbors we had were black. And it never occurred to me that there was any difference. And from that moment on, I became a racial liberal, and I stayed that way all my life.

Jesse Winchester: Now, that's not necessarily a really good thing, I discovered, because in a way, it's racist in its own way. But that's what I was, and it put me at odds with a lot of my school chums and family and the people around me. And it flavored my whole life here.

Emma Fiandt: You said that you remember playing organ in church. Did religion play a big part in your life?

Jesse Winchester: It did. I was raised a Catholic, and there's no way out of religion playing a big part in your life when you're raised as a Catholic. And I was a very – at least by my own standards, a devout Catholic until I reached my late teens when I started to question things and – I fell away from the church

and never really went back. The common parlance today is to say that you're spiritual, but not religious, and I'm afraid that applies to me, too. That's kind of the way I think of myself now.

Emma Fiandt: Okay. So, a little bit about yourself now, are you married or have children?

Jesse Winchester: I'm married, and I have three children, but they're by a previous marriage. They are all grown, and one of them has children of her own.

Bradley Bledsoe: All right, now we're gonna talk a little bit more about your story, specifically with Memphis, and your music career. Do you remember the first time that you realized music was important to you and that it was gonna play a big role in your life?

Jesse Winchester: I grew up that way. I was musical as a very young child. It was just always my focus. So I knew that all along, and it became my identity in the family, my identity at school. It was sort of who I was. And that's been true all my life.

Bradley Bledsoe: Now when you say that it became your identity, is that a positive memory for you?

Jesse Winchester: Yes. I've always been proud of it, yeah.

Bradley Bledsoe: How about Memphis? What does Memphis, Tennessee mean to you, and how did growing up in this city influence your work?

It's a bit like asking a fish to describe the water. It was the world to me.

Jesse Winchester: For many, many years, and in a way it still is, I suppose. It set my culture, my language, the way I look at things. It certainly set my taste in food. I – to this day, I think Memphis has the best food in the world. No joke. And what's more important than food? I really can't think of anything.

If I worked at it, I might come up with a couple of alternatives, but anyway, it's – my tastes – some of my tastes in music have never changed from that. I tuned out on what was happening in the rest of the world very early on, and just decided that, you know, if they made anything better than rhythm and blues, and down home country music, I have yet to hear it. I just – you know, no matter what they come out with, that stuff that I heard when I was a kid is still the best stuff to me, and it – I mean, I hate to be such a stick in the mud, but that's the way it is for me.

Bradley Bledsoe: Speaking more on, I guess, the music of Memphis, who were some of your early influences?

Jesse Winchester: I went through a series of kind of binges on different people. I remember – and first, when I was very young, I was – I loved anything Latin. That rhythm just appealed to me, and the melodies, and the language – I loved it. But then, I heard, in high school – well, of course, Elvis came along when I was maybe 10. And just the whole town – just, that's all we could talk about or think about was Elvis. He just preoccupied everybody in town, including me. But I remember the – I was in the recreation hall, and we used to have – there were two public swimming pools here, Clearwater and – I can't – Rainbow.

And I was in the snack bar at one of them, and somebody played, "What'd I say by Ray Charles?" And the sun came out for me. I heard that music, and I just thought, "This is it. This is fantastic." And from that point on, I just became – anything Ray Charles did, I just had to hear it and just consumed it. So that lasted a long time. I don't – it never did go away, really, my love for Ray Charles. And then I discovered Bobby "Blue" Bland, who I believe was from Arkansas, but he somehow had a Houston connection. But it didn't matter to me. He was a big star here in Memphis, Bobby "Blue" Bland. And I loved him.

And then I discovered Muddy Waters, and all of the Chicago Blues people, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry – I just love Chuck Berry, to this day. I think he's one of the greatest song writers this country has ever produced. The wit, the literacy of Chuck Berry, the facility with language that he had, I just don't know anybody else who can match him.

Those people were really important to me. You'll notice that they're all black. It wasn't until I got to – oh, I guess I was in my early 20s – it's funny, it happened when Martin Luther King was killed. There was a dividing point.

At that time, the black people seemed to recoil from working with white people. Up until then, we had Booker T and the MGs here in Memphis, which was two white kids and two black kids playing together, making fantastic music.

And I wanted to be like Steve Cropper, or a white kid playing black music, so bad. And it affected my playing, too, that very deliberate funky style that he had, very, very simple. This is the way the song goes. It's – there are no extra notes. It's played very, very deliberately, is the word that I keep using. Anyway, when Martin Luther King was killed, it seemed like the black people got so angry that he was a black person who offered the hand of friendship to people, of nonviolence, and what happened? But this person tries to destroy him. And God help us all, he succeeded, to a degree. I think he really tried to poison the well, and what we got was, as I say, the black people recoiling from working with us. Rhythm and blues, up until that time, I think, was a beautiful combination of country music and the blues. You know, sort of like "When a Man Loves a Woman." That was a country song, really, performed in an R and B way, and that's what Elvis was doing, too. It was blending these two schools of music, and it was making something really, really special.

And after Dr. King was killed, what happened was, James Brown, who up until that time was making melodic music, all of the sudden James Brown was playing nothing but grooves that lasted for three and a half or four minutes, in a D-flat or nine chord, that lasted for three or four minutes. And that was it. There was no more – the country music got cut out of rhythm and blues, and now it's developed into what's now hip hop music, which is a groove and the lyrics. No real melody to speak of, which is what I think – that I like to think is what country contributed. So we split off, as a result of that. It's sad to me. It's sad to me.

Bradley Bledsoe: Okay, a little bit more about Memphis. How long did you live and work in Memphis?

Jesse Winchester: I came back from school in the east and I got back to Memphis, I think, in the fall, after I graduated in June. And I got my draft notice in December. And after thinking about it and consulting with some people I trusted – I left in January. So that's – what? – four months, that I stayed here in Memphis, until I – and in January I went to Montreal. And I lived there for the next 37 years.

Bradley Bledsoe: And during that time, when you lived in Canada, I think I've seen you in interviews before, say that Memphis was still such an integral part in forming your music. Can you expand a little bit about that?

Jesse Winchester: Yes. I got to Montreal with an attitude, I discovered, was pretty typical of Americans around – really, anywhere in the world, and that's an arrogance that's unmistakable. I felt like we had the best music in the world in Memphis. And I'm here to tell you about it, to demonstrate it. And that's never really changed. I've never changed that point of view. I still think that Memphis music is the best. I realize it's ridiculous and subjective and arrogant, again, but there it is.

Bradley Bledsoe: Well, we talked a little bit about contemporary events with the King assassination, but maybe you can expand a little bit more on that, and how other contemporary events around the time shaped or inspired your music, whether at the time or later, now?

Jesse Winchester: Well, when I went to Montreal, it was in 1967, and this was the – really, the whole counter-culture hippie movement was really getting into high gear at that point. And musically, what that turned out to be, I'm thinking mainly because of the drugs that everyone was consuming, it turned out to

be songs that involved, you know, ten minute electric guitar solos that began nowhere and wound up nowhere. You know, no cohesion in the music at all, to my ear.

And I think the music of that period was terrible. I just can't stand it. I think the Beatles lost whatever magic they had at the beginning, during that period. I just think people went crazy musically, and every other way. But we're talking about music now, and what happened was, a group called The Band came along. They had been accompanying Bob Dylan, and they made an album called "Music from Big Pink," which had structure, interesting arrangements, lyrics, all the things that I wanted in music. They were essentially a conservative movement in music. Back to respect for your elders, belief in God, close to the land, all these things, all these conservative values. That's what they represented, to me, at least. And given what was going on, this was a breath of fresh air to me, and I took to it right away.

And oddly enough, by some coincidence, I was introduced to the leader and primary song writer, Robby Robertson. And that was my introduction to the recording business, and so forth, the whole – it was the beginning of my recording career. That's how it happened.

Bradley Bledsoe: Okay. And – okay, here's more of a question about, not necessarily your generation, but what role do you think that music should play for future generations, maybe specifically Memphians? And how do you think they can use the music, like you were talking about, like, The Band, and before your other influences, how do you think – do you think our generation can take from that music that you took from when you were our age?

Jesse Winchester: Definitely. Some things never change, and that's one of them. You know, love, courage, honesty are eternal verities, and the role of music is one of those things that will never, ever change.

And you'll have – your generation will have different heroes than mine. If I go back and listen – well, that's not entirely true. I mean, I love my parents' music, but not the way they do. You know, Frank Sinatra, to me, I loved very much, and I see him as a great musician, but I'm sure it's not quite the same way that they – I didn't see him the same way my parents did.

Or if I listen to a really old blues player from the '20s, or the Carter family in country music from the '20s, it just doesn't have the same effect on me that it would to a person from an older generation than me. So you'll have different heroes, I would think, but it amounts to the same thing. Yes, they're gonna be – I don't know enough about modern music to be able to talk about it. But I'm sure that there are – for instance, the punk movement, as I understand it, was – again, this was before your time, too, but it's after my time, and it involved people reacting against – as I understand it, against what they thought was music getting too complicated, too cerebral, whatever.

And they decided that what music needed was raw force, power, intensity, passion, simplicity, and that's what the punk music brought. That sort of cyclic change is always gonna happen, I figure, and it's gonna happen in your generation, just like it did in mine.

Bradley Bledsoe: I guess now we can talk a little bit more about Memphis as a city. And do you have relatives and friends still living in Memphis?

Jesse Winchester: Yes.

Bradley Bledsoe: So you're – where do you see our city heading in the future, and what are your thoughts on the current state of Memphis, if you have any?

Jesse Winchester: Well, Cindy and I lived here for a couple of years when I first came back, so we got a – I got a good view, I think, of the city then, in its more recent incarnation. And it's hard times. I don't remember the relationship between the races being as stressful as it is today, when I was a younger person living here. Of course, I was a white kid. I mean, you know, the world was my oyster, or at least, you know, the world was my rack of ribs, if you'd like. But I – and black people, you saw them wearing

white uniforms, catching the bus to and from working in the white lady's house. You know, that's really all you saw.

So I would never wanna go back to those days, for the black people. On the other hand, it just – there wasn't the violence and the rancor that I seem to see today. What's the cure for that? Well, actually, I think the cure for that is sitting here in the room with us in the person of my friend over here, Chris Little who teaches black kids and white kids, too, that are disadvantaged and in trouble. And it's – I think it's a – we have to have some sort of spiritual rebirth, and it has to come from individuals who just display the love that we've been taught about, but find so hard to put into practice. I – other than that, I really don't know what is gonna help. I think it's people like Chris Little. That's the only hope I see.

Bradley Bledsoe: So do you think that, since the time when you were a child, it – like you said, that Memphis has become more split up, more segregated, even though that's – not legal segregation, which is obviously in effect any more, but do you think that – Memphis has become more divided, there's more cleavage between the races? Is that what you're saying?

Jesse Winchester: It sure seems that way, doesn't it? I mean, I don't wanna ask you to pronounce, but it seems that way to me. I hope I'm wrong.

Bradley Bledsoe: Do you – I guess we're about finished. To wrap up a little bit, do you have any specific advice for, I guess, Memphians a little bit younger than us, musicians coming up today, young Memphians, maybe inspired by music, but afraid to get into the music business, or not sure if they wanna pursue that? Do you have any advice for younger musicians?

Jesse Winchester: I think that if you're not sure, that's kinda tell tale to me. If you're really a musician, you're probably pretty sure that this is what you wanna do. It's – it would be hard to imagine doing anything else, I think. And if you do wanna play music, and – then the only advice I can offer is just to keep playing music.

And you may not get rich or famous, in fact there's a good chance that you won't, but you'll be happy. That's really the only advice I can give you, and just keep playing right in the place that you are. Play every night you can, and let whatever – be a magnet, as opposed to going out and grabbing it.

You know, so just play as well as you can, every opportunity you're given, and whatever is due you will come to you. I believe that.

Bradley Bledsoe: Okay, I have one last question, it's about the history of Memphis. How long has your family, or descendants of your family lived in Memphis? I know that Winchester is a prominent name. Are you related to those Winchesters?

Jesse Winchester: Only indirectly. That family, the family of General James Winchester –

Bradley Bledsoe: Right.

Jesse Winchester: The first mayor of Memphis was Marcus Winchester, and he was the general's son. But we're not directly related to him. My family arrived here in the person of my great grandfather, the bishop, who was the bishop of Arkansas. And he came here from – first he was the bishop of Nashville. Oh, no, he wasn't. He was a pastor at a church in Nashville. And then came to Memphis to pastor a church here, and wound up a bishop, and so forth, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, no, we didn't get here until the turn of the last century.

Bradley Bledsoe: Okay. Well, do you have any – is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't covered about the music, or the history of Memphis, or anything else you would like to touch on?

Jesse Winchester: No. I would just like to say, again, how much I love this city and how much it means to me, and that's all.

Bradley Bledsoe: All right. Well, thank you very much for participating in the crossroads to freedom project. It's been a pleasure.

Jesse Winchester: Oh, no, thank you for having me.

Bradley Bledsoe: Thank you.

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