



Fame & Fortune: Jesse Winchester

American music's most identifiable draft-dodger

By Jay MacDonald • Bankrate.com

Most musical headliners are best known for a hit song, a signature fashion style or a high-profile romantic life. Singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester, on the other hand, is best known for something he refused to do: serve in the Vietnam War.

As a Louisiana kid growing up in Memphis, Tenn., Winchester dreamed of one day playing guitar like legendary Stax session man Steve Cropper, whom you may know from The Blues Brothers. But hailing as he did from a long line of lawyers, young Jesse toed the line and went east to prestigious Williams College instead, where he studied German and fought to suppress his inner soul man.

As fate would have it, a year of overseas study took him to Munich, Germany, where he soon teamed up with a rock band and gigged all over the country. He missed a lot of class but learned a lot of street German -- as well as a vocation he would later need to survive.

Soon after graduating in 1966, Winchester received his draft notice. Fully cognizant of the consequences, he bought a one-way plane ticket from Memphis, Tenn., to Montreal where he would soon become American music's most identifiable draft-dodger.

Following the 1970 release of his self-titled debut album -- produced by Robbie Robertson, of The Band, and engineered by Todd Rundgren -- Winchester's haunting, homesick ballads became big hits and barroom staples as the war that drove him into exile drew to a close. "Yankee Lady," "Biloxi," "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz," "Defying Gravity" and others sold records for everyone from Brewer & Shipley and Jimmy Buffett to Joan Baez, Emmylou Harris, Elvis Costello and Patti Page.

But success was limited for Winchester, who was prevented from performing in the United States until President Jimmy Carter signed amnesty legislation in 1977. He made up for lost time by touring extensively throughout the 1980s until officially retiring from the stage in 1990.

In 1999 Winchester returned to the stage with a new album, "Gentleman of Leisure," and a rekindled love of performing. Three years later, he remarried and, for the first time in 36 years, returned to the United States to live. He and wife Cindy now reside in Charlottesville, Va.

Bankrate caught up with Winchester between tours for a look back on his life as a reluctant front man.

Bankrate: Nice to see you back on the concert tour. How does it feel?

Jesse Winchester: I'm enjoying it more than ever, except maybe back in the very, very beginning when I was playing with bands and wasn't the frontman and had no responsibilities. That was a lot of fun. But I went through some years where, you know, I just got tired of it. When I started up again in 1999, for whatever reason I just loved it. Thank God for that. I learned a lot from Guy Clark actually, about pampering yourself. I break his rules all the time but he's got some good ones, like don't play two nights in a row; I break that one all the time really. The whole thing is to keep you from getting burned out. Just take it easy, you know? Don't try to play everywhere.

Bankrate: What kind of kid were you?

Winchester: Gee. I played music from the very beginning, so I wasn't very athletic. I was good in school. I didn't have a lot of friends.

Bankrate: You were born in Louisiana but you were actually raised in Memphis, right?

Winchester: Yes, my dad was stationed in Louisiana at Barksdale Field, just the other side of the river from Shreveport, but that's not where we were from. My family is from Memphis, Tenn. Right after Dad got out of the army, he got money from the government, as did the other soldiers, a loan or something, and he used his to buy a farm. He was sort of an early hippie, back to nature after the war and wanted to sort of check out of civilization, I guess, because he knew nothing about farming. Anyway, in spite of that, he bought a farm in Mississippi and we farmed there until he had a heart attack, when I was about 12, and couldn't do hard work anymore. So we moved back to Memphis, Tenn., and Dad went to law school and joined the family law firm and knuckled under eventually.

Bankrate: Was he from a long line of lawyers?

Winchester: Lawyers and preachers. My great-grandfather, for whom I'm named, was the Episcopal bishop of Arkansas. There are other preachers in there too, the bishop of Chicago. Although I was raised a Catholic. My mother was a Catholic and the Catholics insist that the children be raised in the Catholic church.

Bankrate: How in the world did you find your way to Williams College? That seems like a stretch.

Winchester: It really is (laughs). Nobody in Memphis, Tenn., knew anything about Williams, including me at the time. It was my uncle; he knew about Williams and Amherst and Trinity, and he recommended it. Williams was really out of my league academically, coming from the South. They let me in, I'm sure, because I was from the South; sort of affirmative action. I really had to struggle to keep up with those Northern boys.

Bankrate: What was your field of study?

Winchester: I didn't study much of anything, but I majored in German, believe it or not. I went to Germany for a year, to the University of Munich, and I didn't study there either. I had a wonderful time. I got a job playing guitar with this band of German fellows and we went all over the country that way. To tell you the truth, I think I learned more German doing that than I would have in the school, because I saw all the other American students there and they were all hanging out together, talking English to each other all the time, whereas I was out there speaking working-class German. I didn't learn what I was supposed to be learning but it was OK. We played the Top Hat club in Hamburg, Germany, where the Beatles played. They were long gone but it was still happening. I really felt like a Bohemian

Bankrate: Of course, like so many those days, you received your draft notice along with your college diploma. Did you speak with anyone in your family about your decision to move to Canada?

Winchester: I spoke to my mother about it, but she's the only one I talked to. My father was dead by this time. I had an older doctor friend, sort of a mentor, and I talked to him, too. He didn't really commit himself one way or the other; he just said, "Do what you think is right." Thanks a lot, doc, you know? Those were the only people I talked to. I pretty much knew what everybody's reaction was going to be, from person to person. I knew what they were going to say.

Bankrate: Did your decision burn bridges within your family?

Winchester: Yes, in the sense that some of them died before I had a chance to reconcile with them, which hurts a lot. Especially my grandfather. My grandfather was the kind of person they just don't make anymore. He was a very leonine man. He could quote poetry at the dinner table. He was just a beautiful, beautiful man, but extremely conservative; my country, right or wrong was his point of view. I can certainly understand that. And he died before I had a chance to make up with him. I'm not sure it would have ever happened, but I would have loved to have had the chance.

Bankrate: That decision put you on many people's radar, for good or ill.

Winchester: That is, unfortunately, probably true. I wish I could wave a wand and make that go away, but there it is. We make our bed and we lie in it.

Bankrate: Did you have a living situation of any kind waiting for you in Canada?

Winchester: No, I had nothing. I had \$300 and an electric guitar. I had enough to buy an airplane ticket, and I flew from Memphis, Tenn., to Montreal.

Bankrate: How did you land on your feet?

Winchester: I had already done the thing in Munich, Germany, I had made my own way there and supported myself and all that, learned another language. I guess that gave me the confidence or the foolhardiness to think that I could do it again. And it turned out that I could. To tell you the truth, it was more fun than anything else.

I'd gone to Canada assuming I would never be able to go back, that was part of the deal, so I just accepted the deal and never really fought against it. I know a lot of other people in my position were lobbying very hard for amnesty, but I always kind of disapproved of that because I thought, somehow you can't have it all. There's a price to be paid for things like that and that seemed a fair price to me. I never worried about touring in the states. It just never occurred to me that that was a possibility. It was all gravy as far as I was concerned. I never thought I would make a record anyway, it just never occurred to me. I wanted to be Steve Cropper, the backup guy

Bankrate: Did you consciously write about missing the South or did those themes just emerge in your early songs?

Winchester: It all comes out of me subconsciously. I'm not able to read the newspaper about something that happened and go hmmm, I think I'll write a song about that. Fortunately or unfortunately, I have to wait for this idea to pop into my head from who knows where. It's all subconscious.

Bankrate: Although you made a life, with a home and family, in Montreal, you never lost your accent, so to speak. As you say in "Nothing But a Breeze," "Me, I want to live with my feet in Dixie and my head in the cool blue North."

Winchester: It seems like I've always stayed Southern in a cultural way. There's just nothing better to me than cornbread and barbecue. I love Southern cooking, I love country music and the blues, and I always will. That's just who I am culturally. And yet on the other hand, mentally I felt very much at home in the North. I like the way people in the North leave you alone. I think sometimes that the North is the brain and the South is the heart. I took to the North pretty well. I like it.

Bankrate: You didn't rush back to the states after Jimmy Carter granted amnesty.

Winchester: No, by that time, I had my family and I was happy in Montreal. Then, after my family grew up and I divorced, I still stayed there because I was just happy there. It was home. I never thought about moving back until I met Cindy in 2002 and just fell in love. It just so happened that she lived in Memphis; it was sheer coincidence. That was what brought me back to the states. She was the friend of my high school sweetheart, and she introduced us. A bit of a soap opera there. My high school sweetheart got very, very sick and I kind of got reacquainted with her to try to cheer her up and that's how I met Cindy, through that.

Bankrate: Have you always managed your own money?

Winchester: I don't budget. I don't really think about it very much. I think of money as another way to express love or appreciation. A hit record is good, you get money for it, because other people like the song, but you have to keep money moving, you can't hang on to it. So if you know somebody who makes beautiful guitars, you pretty much are obligated to support him by buying one of his guitars. If he's a great plumber, you have to hire him even though he might be a little more expensive because he cares about his

work. It's a way to express appreciation like that. I try to keep that attitude, and if I have something I want, I buy it and don't really think too much about tomorrow. So far, so good. They haven't come to lock me away yet.

Bankrate: Are you a Canadian citizen now?

Winchester: I'm a dual citizen actually. You only pay taxes in the country in which you live. The transition back to the U.S. was complicated and it's still going on. I had a Canadian company which owned the copyrights to my songs, and that's been a hassle changing that over and dealing with that. At the moment, I have two accountants, one in the U.S. and one in Canada, and that's a hassle. All that kind of stuff just drives me crazy. I'm not a good businessman because I just don't want to be bothered, more than anything. I'd love to be rich but I'm just not willing to do what it takes to get there, I guess. It's interesting, the people who play the stock market; I love the idea of sitting there reading the paper in the morning and see where there has been a series of heavy storms in Indonesia where they grow coffee or something, so you get your broker on the phone and say, buy coffee futures or something. That sort of thinking appeals to me. If I could just knuckle down and do it, it would be fun. But it's just not going to happen. By the world standards, we're right. But as Saki said, "I'd like to be rich by my own standards."



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