

## A Conversation With Jesse Winchester



Mike Ragogna

**Mike Ragogna:** Hello, Jesse. How are you?

**Jesse Winchester:** Hi, Mike! I'm good, thanks.

**MR:** First of all, how are you feeling these days? (**NOTE:** Jesse had undergone treatment for cancer of the esophagus.)

**JW:** I feel great, thank you. I tire a little quicker than I used to, but that's improving every day. Yeah, I feel great. Thank you for asking.

**MR:** So, what is the latest news on the Jesse Winchester front?

**JW:** (laughs) You've got to go back to the Old Testament. I looked and I saw that there was nothing new under the sun.

**MR:** (laughs) Well, what are you looking at lately?

**JW:** Well, I'm certainly not above pandering to people, but in this case it's true. My home page is *The Huffington Post* -- you know, the page that comes up when you start your browser on your computer. So my news comes a lot from what's on The Huffington Post. My wife criticizes me for reading things like *The Huffington Post* that tend to reinforce my opinions.

**MR:** (laughs) Is that a bad thing?

**JW:** Yeah, I've kind of got to agree with her. I think that you should listen respectfully to the other opinion. You know, since William F. Buckley died, there doesn't seem to be a lot of wit or whatever on the other side. But again, you know, maybe that's just me. I don't know. But I'll tell you what. The conservative column misses William F. Buckley, and badly -- more than conservatives themselves know.

**MR:** I agree with you. He had a humor and intellect -- though kind of snobby at times -- that his contemporaries lacked.

**JW:** He had a sense of humor with the multi-syllabic words. He always seemed to be sort of laughing at himself in a way. Yeah, I miss him.

**MR:** I think it was a charming self-deprecation as opposed to just trying to show off his intelligence.

**JW:** I do too. W.C. Fields always said that his language came from Dickens, and just the sort of overblown nature of it made it funny. P.G. Wodehouse did the same thing, I think.

**MR:** All right, enough about William F. Buckley. (laughs) Let's talk about Jesse Winchester. As a songwriter, you have so many popular songs. For instance, you had a hit with Ed Bruce's version of "Evil Angel."

**JW:** Yeah, he did a fantastic job on that. It's funny you bring that up because I'm asked sometimes what my favorite cover version is, and I always mention that one.

**MR:** To me, it just felt good.

**JW:** Yeah, it just felt right. He got it right.

**MR:** And there's "Biloxi." That has one of the most beautiful -- and especially with the Jimmy Buffett version -- cinematic descriptions, lyrically and musically. What inspired it? What were you going through when you wrote that?

**JW:** Well, like a lot of people in the South -- the mid-South -- we spent our vacations on the Gulf Coast, and that's where that came from. I've spent many beautiful summer days on the shores of Mexico. It was beautiful.

**MR:** There's also "Rhumba Man," my first exposure to it through the late Nicolette Larson's version from her hit album Nicolette. What was your reaction when you heard Nicolette's version?

**JW:** It's pretty much the same any time somebody covers one. There's so much ego wrapped up in it that I can't really make an objective judgment or criticism of it, so it's hard to say. I'm always overjoyed. Nicolette was such a sweet girl.

**JW:** Yeah, for sure.

**MR:** Okay, let's get into "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz." I know that one of the versions was recorded by Anne Murray. I have to ask you -- now I'm

just kidding around here -- did we really need a brand new Tennessee Waltz? I mean, what was wrong with the old one?

**JW:** You know, I can't really be responsible for these things, Mike! (laughs) I know I collect royalty checks such as they are, but it's like Harlan Howard said, "HE wrote the songs and I just held the pen." I don't know where that title came from, I really couldn't tell you. It was a waltz, and it was about Tennessee.

**MR:** (laughs) And there's your very lovely "Defying Gravity."

**JW:** Thank you. Again, I don't know where songs come from. Apparently the singer is talking about dying and how he's not afraid of it. He will face it with a smile, which sounds like complete BS to me. But you know, we have to take him at his word, I guess.

**MR:** How about "Yankee Lady?"

**JW:** That was a little bit of fact and a lot of fiction. I was sitting in my kitchen in Montreal, and it was a beautiful day. I remember the sun coming through, and that's really all I remember about writing it.

**MR:** Now, I want to ask you, since you brought up Canada. Can we go into that for a second?

**JW:** Sure.

**MR:** One of the many things associated with Jesse Winchester is how you protested the Vietnam War by moving to Canada. Do you still have vivid memories of that period?

**JW:** Well, on my own, I don't think of it much. I really don't think about the past much at all, but the world has other ideas often. Like now, I think about it, and it's still vivid in my mind, but so are a lot of things.

**MR:** Okay, there's another Canadian story, which is your Robbie Roberston connection. Can you tell us about that?

**JW:** Yeah. I was making a demo tape in the basement of a church in Ottawa with a friend who had a nice tape recorder. Remember tape recorders? (laughs) A friend, who was a movie maker in Montreal, knew both of us, Robbie and me, and he vowed to get us together, and that's what happened. He brought Robbie down to that basement, and once the tape that I was working on was finished, I sent him a copy of it, which he took to his then

manager Albert Grossman, who I'm sure you know. That was the beginning of my recording career.

**MR:** Nice. And you became popular for "Mississippi, You're on my Mind." Was that written before or after you left?

**JW:** All of my songs were written after I left. I didn't write songs until I had lived in Montreal for, I don't know, almost a year.

**MR:** So Jimmy Carter granted amnesty in the late seventies, and you began performing in the States. What was the reaction to your coming back?

**JW:** There was a lot of media attention for the obvious reasons. It was a very hectic time for me, and I have to say that I wasn't very happy with my life at that point. There's just too much to go into really, in detail. I'll leave it at that.

**MR:** Okay. Let's go back to happiness. "Bowling Green," which The Everly Brothers covered, the Terry Slater song, how did you come across that?

**JW:** It was a hit for The Everly Brothers. They did it kind of light and chipper and cheerful. The tempo was quite a bit up from the way I did it, which was more ballad-like, I guess, and dreamy.

**MR:** You're still touring, aren't you?

**JW:** Yes.

**MR:** We got hooked up because of the AmerEquine Event. Can you tell us about it?

**JW:** Well, my booking agent explained it to me, but I don't trust my memory enough to repeat it to you. Somehow the woman who does the AmerEquine thing is also connected with the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco, and that's essentially where the connection is because I performed there one time, at the Not Strictly Bluegrass Festival. That's where the connection comes from. Really, that's as far as I trust myself to talk about it.

**MR:** Do you like horses?

**JW:** You know, my experience with horses in this lifetime is over. When I was a boy, I loved them, and I rode every day. We had our own when I was young, and then when I was a little bit older, my neighbors had some. There

were a couple of boys that my brother and I would play cavalry all over the west Tennessee countryside with. But gradually, I began to see horses as too much muscle compared to too little self-control. Their temperaments are a little capricious, so I stopped riding horses.

**MR:** That's a great way to put it. "Too much muscle with not enough intellect or control."

**JW:** Yeah, you can ride them all day long, and they'll grudgingly take you where you want to go. But you turn your head back to the barn, and you cannot make them slow down. (laughs)

**MR:** Jesse, as I'm getting older, I really do appreciate your fine crafting of songs.

**JW:** Thank you, Mike.

**MR:** Let me ask you, what would your advice be for new artists?

**JW:** Just keep doing it. That's really all I can say. Steal from the very best, and listen to them, and figure out what they're doing, and imitate it until you figure out your own style. But mainly, it's a matter of just persistence.

**MR:** Beautiful, thank you. As far as the future, we talked about touring, but will there be any recordings?

**JW:** Yes, I need to write about three or four more songs, and I'll be ready to go back into the studio, I hope this summer.

**MR:** All right, well when you get your new batch ready, and you have a label, definitely come back. I'd love to have another conversation with you, sir.

**JW:** Thank you, Mike.

### **Some of Jesse's Most Popular Songs and Recordings:**

1. TELL ME WHY YOU LIKE ROOSEVELT
2. MISSISSIPPI, YOU'RE ON MY MIND
3. YANKEE LADY
4. THE BRAND NEW TENNESSEE WALTZ
5. BILOXI
6. TALK MEMPHIS
7. BOWLING GREEN
8. DO IT

9. DEFYING GRAVITY
10. SAY WHAT
11. I'M LOOKING FOR A MIRACLE
12. DO LA LAY
13. SKIP ROPE SONG
14. EVERYBODY KNOWS BUT ME
15. RHUMBA MAN
16. A SHOWMAN'S LIFE
17. DANGEROUS FUN
18. ALL OF YOUR STORIES

*Transcribed by Kyle Pongan*