

Singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester here Friday

BY GEORGE VARGA
SEPTEMBER 8, 2010



JESSE WINCHESTER

Not many musicians can simultaneously make Elvis Costello choke up and bring Neko Case to tears with an unadorned solo acoustic performance of a single song. But that's exactly what veteran troubadour Jesse Winchester did last fall in New York when he sang his wonderfully poignant ballad about two teenagers in love, "Sham-A-Ling-Dong-Ding," a standout number from his enchanting 2009 album, "Love Filling Station." You can watch it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uKGWpqnS8E%20>

The setting was Harlem's famed Apollo Theater, where Costello's Sundance TV music series, "Spectacle," filmed its first two seasons in front of loudly appreciative audiences. Louisiana native Winchester — who appeared on an episode alongside Costello, Case, Sheryl Crow and Ron Sexsmith — quietly stole the show with that song and an equally spare but stunning version of "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz," an understated classic from his 1970 debut album.

"Doing 'Spectacle' has been a big boost for my career," said Winchester, who kicks off a five-city California tour here Friday night at the all-ages AMSD Concerts (formerly Acoustic Music San Diego) in Normal Heights.

"I'm working at least twice as much as I used to. But I'm not really well known, so 'twice as much' for me is still not the same as for a really popular act."

In 2007, Winchester received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Composers, Artists and Publishers. That he is not a household name stems from a simple twist of fate.

In 1967, after earning a degree in German, he moved to Montreal as a conscientious objector to the war in Vietnam. He became a Canadian citizen and remained there until 2002, when he and his second wife relocated to Virginia. He credits her with inspiring his 10th album, "Love Filling Station," his first in nine years.

Yet, while his profile has remained low, Winchester's music has made an impact, thanks to his songs being recorded by such admirers as Costello, Jimmy Buffett, Emmylou Harris, The Weather Girls and Jerry Garcia.

At 66, Winchester is unlikely to suddenly become famous. But his voice is still supple and pure, and he has no desire to retire.

"I dread the possibility of having to live without being able to sing, play and write songs," he said. "The day may come and I'll have to deal with it then, but I don't look forward to it."



Winchester spoke with us at length last week from his home in Virginia. Here are excerpts from that conversation.

Question: You were born on a U.S. Air Force base in Louisiana and later lived in Germany, two things I share in common with you. Out of curiosity, prior to college how many schools did you attend and how did moving around affect your view of the country and the world?

Answer: Actually, very little. What do they say (in the military)? You must route. It was actually the Army Air Corps at that time, during the Second World War, but my dad bought a

farm using the G.I. bill and started farming in southern Mississippi. We moved from farm to farm, so that was mainly the nomadic part of my life.

Question: What kind of farm?

Answer: He grew cotton and soy beans, mainly

Question: Did you help out on the farm?

Answer: Oh a little bit. Dad had a heart attack and couldn't do the hard work. So he went to night school and became a lawyer.

Question: Several references I checked indicate you attended college in the U.S. and in Germany, but none of them indicate what field your degree is in.

Answer: Well, it was in German.

Question: What compelled you to get a degree in German?

Answer: (Laughs) I don't know that I'd use that word at all. I had a sort of affinity with German, I guess. I had to pick one and the German department was the smallest at the school, and I thought that was a positive.

Question: Sprechen Sie Deutsch?

Answer: Yah. Ein bizen.

Question: I'd continue this interview in German, but my grammar has gone down the toilet.

Answer: I'm glad!

Question: When did you live in Germany, and where?

Answer: I was in Munich in 1965 and 1966.

Question: The 1960s was a pretty volatile time in Europe, politically and socially. What was the impact on you of being abroad for two years?

Answer: That's a good Question:. I spent my time playing in a bar band in Munich and I'm not sure that affected my political views at the time. Amongst my age group, there was a lot of anti-American feeling at the time that made me feel more positive about the U.S. at the time. I sort of got defensive as an American. If anything, it pushed me a little toward the right. That changed pretty quickly. But it's fair to say that in Europe I got a little defensive about the criticism of Americans, especially from the Germans. I thought we'd been pretty good to them after the war.

Question: What college did you attend in Munich?

Answer: I was at the University of Munich. I mean, technically, I was. I managed to pass the exams, but if they had asked me whether the professor wore glasses, I couldn't have told you! (laughs)

Question: What was the name of the band you played in while you were in Munich?

Answer: The Night Sounds.

Question: What kind of music did The Night Sounds play?

Answer: I brought in the Chuck Berry and James Brown (songs) and the others were into (Italian and jazz pop singer) Caterina Valenti and other European artists.

Question: I'm a longtime admirer of your singing, so no offense intended, but I have a hard time imagining you doing a James Brown grunt and scream.

Answer: Consider yourself lucky! They kept me on in the band, that's all I can say.

Question: Were you writing songs when you lived in Munich?

Answer: That only came later, when I got to Quebec. Once again, I was working in bar bands and out in the provinces. I was in little towns with really nothing to do in the day time.

Question: Many of your songs evoke the great Southern music tradition of such great songwriters as Hoagy Carmichael? Was he an influence on you?

Answer: Absolutely. That's a beautiful compliment. Thank you for that.

Question: Like Carmichael and Mose Allison, who's from Mississippi, your singing and songs generally have a relaxed, unhurried feel. Is that a Southern aesthetic?

Answer: I never really thought about that. It's probably true.

Question: I recently interviewed A.J. Croce, who lives here in San Diego and is the son of the late Jim Croce. A.J. told me he feels that 80 percent of the songs he writes are throwaways, and the other 20 percent tend to be good. How long did it take you to feel you had become accomplished as a songwriter?

Answer: That's another good Question:. I don't know. I'm a very rigorous editor. And if I don't think something is going anywhere I will drop it.

Question: Do you go back to it later?

Answer: That's happened, but not very often. I'd just as soon start a new one. So if I'd started my editing process, I like it right from the beginning. I guess that's the best answer I can give.

Question: Was there an early pivotal moment with music you had as a child?

Answer: Well I was a musician from early childhood, so that decision was almost made for me. My mama sent me off to piano lessons, but I didn't really catch fire until I went out and bought myself a ukulele, when I was 10. That was something where I didn't have anyone standing over me. I could play what I heard on the radio and that's the point I started playing by ear and loving it.

Question: Did you later have an epiphany with a particular musician or song?

Answer: I remember being in a hamburger joint, somewhere where they had a juke box, and I heard Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say' for the first time and that opened my eyes: '*This* is the direction to go in; *this* is what I should sound like.'

Question: Was there an immediate impact? Were you soon playing in an R&B band?

Answer: We were lucky in Memphis that music was everywhere. Memphis had such a big black population that even the white people there were really more interested in blues than any other music. Take Booker T & The MGs; it wasn't an accident that band was (comprised of) black guys and white guys, because that's sort of what Memphis was like. You had to go Nashville before you heard a lot of country music. Everyone was into the blues in Memphis and it was all over the radio, that and gospel. It was easy to hear. We had great disc jockeys, like Dewey Phillips, and that was my musical education.

Question: I recall former Memphis-based musicians, such as Hank Crawford and Ike Turner, telling me how the young Elvis Presley would come to watch them play in clubs and sometimes he'd be the only white person there. What impact did segregation have on your ability to go out and hear music in Memphis back then?

Answer: Well, I was younger than Elvis and by the time I could drink or go into those clubs, it was pretty much Willie Mitchell's band playing at the Manhattan Club, and other people would come and sit in. When I was 18 I went off to school in the northeast, so that put an end to that. I didn't do much of that club-hopping, because I wasn't old enough.

Question: You studied in Munich for two years, then came back to the U.S. how long was it before you moved up to Canada?

Answer: It was a matter of months.

Question: For the benefit of those who don't know the reasons, why did you move to Canada?

Answer: It was really just the war (in Vietnam) that made me go to Canada. When I first got to Canada, to get my 'landed immigrant' status and be official, I needed a regular job. No official then would be really impressed with me saying 'I am a musician.' So, I looked around for a regular job and just couldn't find one. My French -- knowing how to quote a few lines of Baudelaire wasn't going to cut it in Quebec, certainly not enough to hold down job in Montreal. I got a letter from a professor at Sir George Williams University saying that he'd give me a job as, I don't know what, a lab assistant or something. It was a bogus letter.

Question: In hindsight, was that a good thing that, in that it thrust you head-first into performing and songwriting?

Answer: From a musical point of view, for sure. I'm not even sure I'd have been a professional musician (otherwise). As a matter of fact, I wouldn't mind being a journalist. Not to pander to you, but I've always enjoyed hanging out with journalists. They make the best drinking companions in the world. But I'm shy. And you have to be a little more sociable to be a journalist than I am.

Question: Many of your songs have a timeless quality, while others sound very much of their time. And then, some of your songs have become timely again. How do you feel now when you look back at a song of yours, like, say, 'Twigs and Seeds?'

Answer: Well that's obviously a sort of juvenile effort. You know, I'm not ashamed of it or anything. But I don't think I'd write that way today.

Question: I don't know if you remember it, but when you played in San Diego in 2005 at Humphrey's Concerts by the Bay, one of your ballads was interrupted by a rather loud mother duck and her brood waddling past the front of the stage.

Answer: I do remember it. Playing outdoors is hard for me. I prefer to play indoors and in the dark. It seems to be more conducive to (creating), well, magic is the only word I can think of. At festivals, people throw Frisbees and head for the Porto-Potties and it's much harder for me to accomplish what I want to do.

Question: Does that mean you don't play festivals?

Answer: I do them, because they have their own charm. For one thing, it's a place for me to see all the musicians. It's really the only time I see other musicians and that's fun for me. So festivals are fine, if I just relax and take them for what they are.

Question: If you were coming back to Humphrey's I was going to try and convince you that the ducks had been replaced by an even louder flock of mallards.

Answer: (Laughs)

Question: You are, in fact, playing at Acoustic Music San Diego, which is concert series you have played at before that is held in a church in the Normal Heights neighborhood of San Diego. Is that an anomaly for you to play in a church?

Answer: That happens really pretty often. There's a place in New Jersey where these people put on all their shows in a church and that works Ok for me. If I had a drummer, it would be a problem, acoustically, but I don't.

Question: I would think stillness is optimal for hearing your music live.

Answer: It is, yes. I don't have any accompanists; I've not for years.

Question: You were featured, unaccompanied, on a recent episode of 'Spectacle,' the Sundance TV music series hosted by Elvis Costello. You played 'Sham-A-Ling-Dong-Ding,' a song off your new album and Neko Case, who was sitting next to you on stage, was so moved by it she in tears. Are you aware that your songs are bringing listeners to tears?

Answer: People tell me after the show. Other than that, I don't have any way of knowing.

Question: Do people tell you that often?

Answer: Well, modesty forbids me from saying, but I guess they do.

Question: How does that impact your performance? Does it make it harder to focus and inflect the lyrics properly, if you know people are crying?

Answer: If you're thinking like that – that you'll make people cry -- then it's pretty much guaranteed it won't work. You really have to focus on meaning what you say. You had asked me a previous Question: about a catalytic moment in my life with music. I remember watching an old talk show, it might have been Mike Douglas, on TV. And the guests were Jan Peerce, the great operatic tenor, and Waylon Jennings, on the same show. And Jan came on and did, I have no idea what he sang. But it was beautiful and he hit all the notes and it was powerful and he had all the beauty that talent and discipline can provide.

But a little while later, Waylon came on and played, just him and his guitar. I think he played 'Amanda,' the Barbara Mandrell song, and it just was so powerful. And Waylon, half the notes he (sang), he didn't really hit them. It was just this sort of rough stone of a man up there singing these tender lyrics, and I never forgot that. I thought: 'Wow that's what it's about.' You talk about people crying. It reminds me of that moment for me. I said: 'That's what you can do, just sitting up there and meaning what you say. That's all it takes.' You can practice and have teachers, like Jan Peerce. But what people really want is to be touched the way Waylon Jennings touched me.