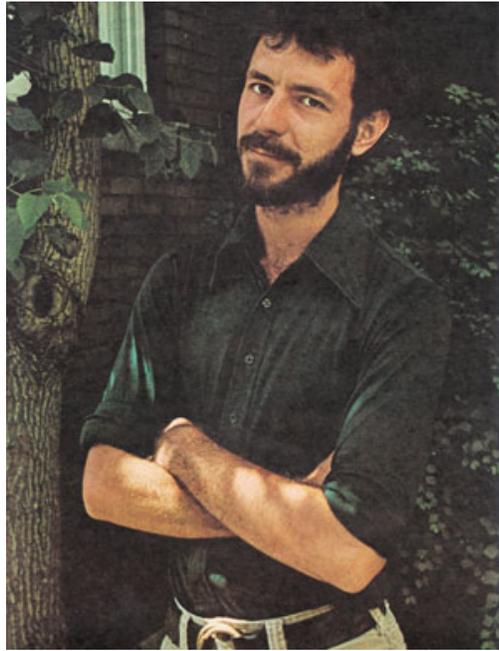


Reb Without a Cause

Jesse Winchester came here to make music, not trouble



PUBLISHED IN THE TORONTO STAR, CANADIAN MAGAZINE, August 9, 1975

By: Roy MacGregor

They are at it again, these people. They are on the telephone this time, and Jesse Winchester has come running in from the back yard with a wide sluice of sweat forming down the spine of his jersey. It is not the phone call that has done this to him, though – he’s dealt with the people before – it is the turning over of his tomato patch.

This time it is the California grape boycott they are trying to sell him. There is talk of a petition that will be appearing in all the dailies, one that Margaret Atwood will probably agree to sign. They want to know if it’s all right to add Jesse Winchester’s name, him being a draft dodger after all, and they are trying to persuade him that he could give the movement just a touch more clout.

Winchester listens politely – the voice on the phone belongs to a long-ago friend – then begs off just as politely. “I’m sorry,” he says. “But I just don’t know enough about it all, I’m afraid.” Much later, after hanging up, he adds: “The truth is, I’m pretty conservative.”

But they will call again; if not them, then someone like them, with some other cause. And Winchester will continue to spoil their romantic ideas of what a draft dodger should be, their hopes that he will be like some wide-eyed child of Jerry Rubin and Jane Fonda. He never seems to be quite what they are looking for. To them, he probably seems closer to the child of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson.

“To this day a lot of Canadians are worried that all the draft dodgers are revolutionaries,” he told an American writer last fall. “A lot of people wanted me to appear at rallies and encourage people to revolt or whatever But they were very disappointed in me, believe me. I’ve always been turned off by political rhetoric and all this kind of stuff. I’m a middle-of-the-road person politically.”

Actually, Jesse Winchester is middle-of-the-road in more ways than that. He drives a Volvo, has a wife and two small children, keeps a garden, falls asleep shortly after 11 o'clock, and believes welfare saps people's initiative. It is a quiet lifestyle that others wouldn't even bother taking note of, were it not for two very important elements in that life: Winchester's non-war record and his music. Both, but particularly the first, make it extremely difficult for him to sustain the way of life he wants.

As a draft evader he stands apart simply because of his name – vaguely recognizable in a group of unknowns called to war. For whatever reasons (and Muhammad Ali excepted), very few star athletes or rock 'n' roll heroes ever seemed to get drafted. Winchester is different simply because he attained his small *fame* after going to his new home in Montreal. And it was only then that he found he was a much-wooded blood brother to those who had arguments with war, amnesty, lettuce and now grapes. They discovered, much to their chagrin, that the one draft dodger who had a name that might matter didn't even consider himself distant kin to some of their sympathies.

As a musician he stands apart because he represents a reverse side of the mirror that says musical talent can surface only in the United States. Winchester came to Canada and managed somehow to be discovered here, and though the fame he has found has not been comparable to that of Canadians who went south for their careers, people like Joni Mitchell, he has produced three critically acclaimed albums. His songs – 'Yankee Lady' and 'The Brand New Tennessee Waltz' are two – have been recorded by The Everly Brothers, Joan Baez, Melanie, Tim Hardin, Wilson Pickett, Tom Rush and a host of others. *Rolling Stone* magazine, after calling him "one of the most important singer/songwriters" as far back as early 1970, adopted him as a political mascot, sort of a favorite expatriate son. And kept him as such for over four years, before finally checking out his authenticity then going quickly sour on him when it was found he was virtually apolitical. In the five years he's been recording, Winchester has built up cult following in North America and Britain, and he has become one of the finest songwriters Canada has ever produced, for Winchester is convinced he would have never have written or recorded had he not left home and come here. That he came at all is puzzling when you consider his background.

James Ridout Winchester was born into a responsible, upper-class Memphis family 32 years ago. He was named after his great-great-great-great-grandfather, as was the first son of each generation before him and as is his own son now. The first James Ridout Winchester, with Andrew Jackson and James Overton, founded Memphis and there raised his family in the stern, Roman Catholic manner that has carried through to the present generation. The men distinguished themselves in war, law, politics and religion; Jesse's father had been a lawyer and he was naturally expected to follow suit.

"There was some wealth," he says. "But we were wealthy mostly in our self-image.... It was that whole southern patrician number."

His father's law career was disrupted by the Second World War. He served in the South Pacific as a navigator and bombardier officer in the air force, and when he returned home he wasn't the same. Leaving law for farming, he fell ill, had one heart attack when Jesse was 12, and another, which killed him, seven years later. The man had been "an abstraction of virtue" to his eldest son, and when he died and the mind required some blame to rationalize the hurt, the son could think only of the war, which had changed his father forever.

Young Winchester had been a precocious child, and excellent student who never complained of the 10 years he spend learning classical piano, or of the 12 years of hard religious study. When he came of college age he chose Williams in Massachusetts, where he studied German, French and

philosophy. It was a time when campuses seemed to have two functions – political rallying and football – and young Winchester was involved in neither.

In his junior year he went to Munich to study the German language and philosophers in their own element, and it was then that music finally took over. To pick up spending money, he and some German friends formed a group they called The Night Sounds and began playing pop and country and western music in Hamburg and the towns of the Bavarian Alps. Winchester became a minor German sensation; he was from the American south, after all, and to the Germans that gave him credibility when singing American music, particularly country and western. He did all the group's singing, something that was entirely new to him.

When he came back home, he too had changed. "Memphis seemed so provincial and backward to me this time after I'd seen the fair. People didn't seem to even know there was a world out there. My parents raised us to believe there were broader horizons than the Mississippi Delta, though, and I had seen some." The draft notice came one day, and he thought of what war had done to a man he once knew, thought also of the lure of other horizons, and in 1967 flew to Montreal. The city seemed romantically European, he knew some French, and a friend had spoken well of life in Canada. He changes the 'James' to 'Jesse' and came to find a new life to go with his new name.

It was many months before Winchester fully warmed to Quebec. A road job with a French-Canadian group, Les Astronautes, very nearly ended him as they toured continually in the backwoods bars north of Quebec City, where he was unable even to pick up English paperbacks for company. He spent a period in Montreal living on popcorn, peanut butter and tea, coming slowly to terms with the psychedelic epidemic that hit Montreal in the summer of 1967. Then he finally woke up to his own talent, deciding to change his total musical attitude and become a creator of music rather than an imitator.

"Until then I'd tried to sound black when I sang. And I was very good at it. It even got to the point where I couldn't sing anything but black music, but when I got settled in Montreal I started realizing I was white. I decided then to stop sounding like something I'm not and I went back to looking for my white roots. Canada deserves all the credit – I didn't start writing until I got here."

Winchester began performing his own material in the small coffeehouses of Quebec and Ontario, playing for nothing or next to it, and one day a tape he had made was played in Ottawa for Robbie Robertson, the leader of The Band. Robertson liked it well enough to get Winchester connected with Albert Grossman, The Band's (and Bob Dylan's) manager in New York; well enough to produce Winchester's first album, play on it himself, and make Winchester The Band's opening act on a massive tour.

Suddenly people were talking about Jesse Winchester and listening to him. Suddenly, too, there were others who wanted to use Winchester for his symbolism, not his music, and went after him to get him to speak out against all the evils of American imperialism and for the virtues of pacifism. Unfortunately for them, he wasn't the political animal they had hoped for.

"I never was real vocal in the thing," he says. "Never encouraged anyone to come, never said I wished the Viet Cong would win. I've never been to a rally in my life, not even to a demonstration. I've never called anyone a pig. I've just tried to live with some of the ideas my family taught me – a spoonful of honey is better than a barrelful of vinegar."

Such a soda pop philosophy, however, is not shared by all people. Even though the war is over and best left behind, it often seems as if Jesse Winchester will always be remembered as an American

draft dodger, despite the fact that he is now a Canadian citizen. Certain radio stations in the U.S. have actually refused to play his music. He has friends in Canada that are convinced Winchester gets fewer concert dates around the country because certain promoters feel his stigma might hurt ticket sales, but that, of course, is impossible to prove. Often, when media people come to talk they spend less time on his music than on the American involvement in south-east Asia. To them, and to many others, Jesse Winchester will always be a musician last. He has slowly come to realize that in coming to Canada the greater fight lay before him.

And it is not just the anti-draft-evader element that refuses to let bygones be bygones, it is also those elements that fought hardest against the war. Last summer for example, when President Gerald Ford announced his program offering conditional amnesty for draft dodgers in exchange for a government assigned work period, *Rolling Stone* dispatched a reporter to check into their political mascot and see how he was reacting. They expected, it would seem, to find his fingers still charred from the burning of his draft card; they wanted someone who would attack with vengeance Ford's foolish unwillingness to concede a "blanket" amnesty.

"They wanted good copy with all the bitterness," Winchester says. "I guess they wanted someone who'd yell – I ain't gonna fight! My parents are a drag! The government loused me up! – not a family man who wants to take it easy."

What *Rolling Stone* found was an unconcerned Jesse Winchester, more worried over the reddening of his tomatoes. "My bridge is burned," he told the reporter. "I'm sort of committed to this life. If this proposal means I can go back for a funeral or a wedding or to look around Memphis for a week, then it's okay. But when we first came up here, we did it fully aware that we would never be allowed to go home. That was the deal."

And that is the crux of Winchester's dilemma. His peculiar patriarchal background may have failed somehow to instill any undying loyalty for the Stars and Stripes, but it did manage to give him a burdening pride. The simplest solution as far as his career is concerned would be to go back, beg forgiveness, get the work obligation out of the way and tackle the music world where it really is – south of the border. Winchester is a cult musician, an entertainer with small, intense followings in nearly every city. And while it is possible to grow fat as a cult hero in the United States, where the pockets of fans are more numerous, it is possible in Canada to only get by. Which he will.

Winchester talks often of the "deal" he struck when he abandoned his homeland, and it seems abundantly clear in his latest album that he fully intends to hold up his end of the bargain. Titled *Learn To Love It*, there's even a fleur-de-lis on the cover and two of the songs are completely in French. Another song is a hybrid of the American Depression song, 'Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt,' in which the late American president is referred to as "the poor man's friend" for establishing work programs in the 1930s; Winchester updated the song to suit his personal story, adding two more "poor man's friends" along the way – Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau.

"Why shouldn't I praise Canada?" he says. "This country gave me a new home, a new life, a wife and children and a place to live where there is a certain amount of moral responsibility among neighbors. I'll be here till the day I die."

~~~~~