

Winchester: It's the Music, Not the Man

By Mark Kernis

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Sometimes circumstances make a performer seem larger than his work. An untimely death can catapult a reputation beyond actual achievement; less sensationally, social conditions can cast an artist in a different public light. That's what happened with Jesse Winchester.

In 1967, one of the most memorable years in rock'n'roll history, Winchester moved to Canada to avoid the draft. No buildings burned. No rhetoric hurled at an unhearing government. No bitter statements about a lost career. Winchester left quietly and settled into a life a long way from his southern American roots.

Three years later, The Band's Robbie Robertson "discovered" Winchester, produced his first album and started the industry talking. That album included "Yankee Lady," "Biloxi" and "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," and it seemed a new talent had arrived.

Here was a contemporary singer/songwriter who many thought would reach heights later scaled by Gordon Lightfoot, James Taylor and Jackson Browne. The album was easy-going but deep, and people like Joan Baez covered Winchester tunes without hesitation. But there were no tours. He was a draft-dodger who sang in Canadian clubs with a Canadian band, married a Canadian woman and raised a family.

The story could easily have ended there, with Winchester kicking around bars, releasing an occasional album and having his songs recorded by Jimmy Buffett and Jonathan Edwards. But in 1977 President Carter pardoned Vietnam-era draft resisters, and Winchester was able to come home. Except that home was now Canada, and America was practically a foreign country. To him. To many people here, Jesse Winchester was a personification of the war's tragedies and frustration Jesse Winchester was a symbol.

In March of 1977 he returned to his children haunts in Memphis, and in May he came to Washington. Much was made of his trip to the Nation's Capital. Six nights at the Cellar Door quickly sold out, and rather than struggle with a flood of phone calls the club management took the unusual tack of having the tickets distributed by Ticketron. In the meantime, Winchester found that his return was a lot less unobtrusive than his departure.

He was suddenly a media hero, a visible war casualty. Despite his soft-spoken demeanor and introspective music, Winchester became a celebrity. Audiences gave him standing ovations before he played a note, and every song was received like a newly discovered classic.

His tour was a promotional triumph, but the accompanying album, "Nothing but a Breeze," was rushed and insensitively produced. Radio stations cold-shouldered it, and Winchester's new-found star began to fade. In all the "return" hoopla, his music was overlooked.

Sunday, Winchester returns to Washington with a new album and a new outlook. The album, "A Touch on the Rainy Side," is one of his strongest. Recorded in Nashville, featuring American musicians, and produced by Norbert Putnam (Jimmy Buffett, Dan Fogelberg), "A Touch on the Rainy Side" presents a mature composer and a singer who has never lost his sense of place.

The title cut, dedicated to his wife, is a bit overproduced, but "A Showman's Life" is autobiographical without being self-indulgent. In fact, considering Winchester's instant fame and rapid return to relative anonymity, the words are quite revealing:

Nobody told me about this part,

They told me all about the pretty girls and wine,

The money and good times,

No mention of all the wear and tear on an old honky-tonker's heart.

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"Wintry Feeling," which is about the difference between Montreal and California (Montreal wins), and "Little Glass of Wine," about his drinking days, are almost as moving.

For diversity, there's "High Ball" - as much a rocker as Winchester produces - a classy remake of the Tony Orlando and Dawn hit "Canadida" and the gospelish "I'm Looking for a Miracle."

Live, Winchester has pretty much the same persona that he projects on record: shy and private, but personable and surprisingly loose. He lacks intensity, but he's not laconic and on tunes like "Rhumba Man" he moves jerkily but sincerely, exuding happiness.

When Winchester steps on the Warner Theater stage Sunday - a week after Fleetwood Mac and a few days before Bruce Springsteen - there will be no television cameras or mob-scene interviews. The only reporters there will be critics, just as likely to pan him as to praise him. But Winchester will present his act as he always has; he has not changed nearly as much as our perception of him has. Maybe now his work, not his life, will get the attention.