

JESSE WINCHESTER : TALK MEMPHIS

By 1981, it had been three years since the last Jesse Winchester album. In the meantime, disco had come and blessedly gone. Jesse was still in Canada, but Albert Grossman, the head of Bearsville Records, had the idea of recording him in Memphis, Jesse's hometown during the '50s and '60s. It was a decision made easier by the fact that Grossman had struck a production deal with Willie Mitchell at the Royal Recording Studio.

Royal had been the old *Hi Records* studio, built out of an abandoned movie theater with money from Bill Black Combo records. Willie had been a recording artist there, then a producer. As a producer, he had discovered Al Green and made *Hi Records* into a player. In 1977, *Hi* was sold against Willie's wishes, but he had hung onto the studio. The neighborhood around the studio was almost desperately run down by then. The studio itself was, as Jesse says, plenty funky: the raggedy carpet on the floor, the somnolent guard on the door, and the smoke from a 1001 nights in the air. As a kid, Jesse had been to see Willie perform, but he found working with him a not altogether pleasurable experience.

"This calls upon all the charity I've got," he says. "Willie's got a nice sense of simplicity. He doesn't like complicated grooves. He's almost country in his taste for grooves. His taste for chord changes is a little more *outré*. He's a strong personality, and I can't say I really got along with him all that well. It was difficult."

The simplicity was engaging. The drum-

ming was kept to simple timekeeping and punctuation. The drums had the warm, muddy tone that Willie had perfected when he was cutting Al Green. The lead guitarist was Michael Toles, the man with both feet on the wah-wah pedal on "Shaft." Nothing was in the mix that didn't deserve to be there. In that regard, it was a very "Memphis" record.

"Say What" had a hopelessly engaging melody, and the breezy, insouciant humor that has always characterized Jesse's best work." I got the word from off of my broker, Sell it all, son, and stick to poker." The stat books tell us that it was Jesse's biggest hit, rising to number 32 on the Hot 100. Jesse, though, says he remembers it being a hit out in Western Canada, but doesn't remember anything about it hitting in the States.

"Hoot And Holler," once the title of a Rufus Thomas radio show on Memphis's WDIA, becomes a rockabilly romp very much in the Memphis style, while "Talk Memphis" is dotted with reference points to the town Jesse says he loves the best. There's 'DIA and the famous barbecue that can go through you like an electric shock. And blue suede shoes, and where were you when Elvis died?

As "Talk Memphis" faded, it closed the door on Jesse's eleven years with Bearsville Records. The label had done middlingly well in the '70s with the British rock band Foghat and with Todd Rundgren, but by the early '80s it was suffering from Albert Grossman's lack of commitment. Some days he wanted to run a record company; some days he didn't.

"Bless his memory," says Jesse. "He was a true renaissance man, and somebody should

write a book about him. I would describe Albert as Mr. Toad - a passion for a yellow motor car today and something else tomorrow. He was a bit of a dilettante. A great man, though. I don't mean to damn with faint praise. By the time "Talk Memphis" came out, Albert was drifting. And when Albert drifted, everybody drifted. It was his hobby, and sometimes he didn't feel like doing it. I wasn't Bob Dylan. I wasn't going to bring those halcyon days back for him."

It was eight years before Jesse recorded again. In between, in January 1986, Albert Grossman died at London's Heathrow Airport on the way to the music industry's schmooze 'n' booze fest in Cannes. Through it all, Jesse continued and continues to write songs. He mails the tapes to his Nashville publisher. His hit rate has been pretty good. Wynonna Judd has cut two of his songs. Emmylou Harris, Michael Martin Murphy, and The Mavericks have taken them as well.

Jesse has no intention of moving to Nashville, and is happy to let his music publisher take care of the thankless task of getting cuts. He performs occasionally, torn between wanting worldly success and telling himself it's shameful making a display of yourself, trying to convince people how good you are.

"I just don't have the desire to do it," Jesse said recently. "I'm missing something vital. I'm more a writer than a recording star. It's more satisfying to sit in the background, and hear somebody else singing it on the radio. It's just better all around. I don't have to compromise myself so badly. It's just better."

- COLIN ESCOTT, Toronto, July 1994

Produced by Willie Mitchell

Engineered by Willie Mitchell, John Holbrook, Warren Wagner and Oscar Milan
Remixed by John Holbrook, Assisted by Mark McKenna

Recorded At Royal Recording Studio, 1320 So. Lauderdale, Memphis, Tennessee -
Except "Leslie" recorded at Bearsville Sound Studio, Bearsville, New York and Engineered by George Carnell.

Mastered by Bill Kipper at Master Disk, New York New York

Musicians

Fender Rhodes Piano: Donald Brown

Synthesizer: Carl Marsh

Drums: Eddie Fisher, Blair Cunningham

Bass: Steve Cobb

Acoustic "Grand" Piano: Willie Mitchell

Percussion: Walter Person

Guitars, Guitar solos, Guitar synthesizer:

Michael Toles

Background vocals: Jesse Winchester, Erma

Shaw, Cindy Farr, Elizabeth Smith

- except "Leslie":

Drums: Gary Burke

Bass: Brad Stahl

All other vocals and instruments by Jesse Winchester

Original Art Direction: Christine Sauers

Photography: Aaron Rapoport

Re-issue Producer: Holger Petersen

Re-issue Design: Rob Streshaw

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