

Third Down 110 To Go – Liner Notes -1994 CD – Stony Plain Records



Much happened between the release of Jesse Winchester's debut album and its follow-up, "Third Down, 110 To Go". What hadn't happened was that Jesse hadn't become an international star and sold hundreds of thousands of albums as he had hoped, but he had married Leslie, and become a father. His record company, Ampex, had folded, but his manager, Albert Grossman, had struck a deal with Warner Bros., a company with a better than even chance of lasting out the year. And Jesse had recorded a complete abandoned album between the first album and "Third Down, 110 To Go".

The aborted album was produced by Grossman's artist-in residence, Todd Rundgren, with Full Tilt Boogie. Grossman saw Rundgren as a producer, engineer, studio designer, and recording artist. He had engineered Jesse's first

album and was assigned to produce the second. The result, says Jesse, was execrable. "It was horrible. It was just so terrible. I got along great with Todd personally, and I have tremendous respect for him, but the album we did together was just awful." Three songs were rescued: "Midnight Bus," "Glory To The Day," and "Silly Heart." Ampex hung on to the tapes while they were going out of business which delayed "Third Down" even more.

The rest of "Third Down" was produced by Jesse himself. The title is a CFLism denoting a pretty hopeless situation. The original liner notes were by Montreal music journalist Juan Rodriguez, who had been the first true believer in the world of print, and had written about Jesse for "Rolling Stone". His brief text evoked the Winchesters hunkering down for the winter. In the accompanying photos, the bottle of red wine is almost empty and the hash pipe is close-by.

The music had a gentle cast that, Jesse contends now, was a reaction against Todd Rundgren's production style. The backing musicians included guitarist Amos Garrett who turned in some of his most lyrical work. "The experience with Todd was of having a lot of people around me who didn't understand what I wanted. I was so tired of trying to get across the feeling that I wanted, I just said, 'To hell with it. I'll just make the most basic, simplest thing I can.' Plus I felt guilty about spending all of Albert's money—my money actually—on this abortion, and I wanted to make something really cheap."

Jesse had clearly matured as a songwriter. Some of the lighter songs, like "Do It" and "Isn't That So," had the goofy humor of Roger Miller. Being witty in song presents an entirely different challenge from being witty in a piece of journalism; songs can't just be funny the first time, otherwise they're novelties. They have to betray a sly wit that bears repeated listening. At the same time, Jesse proved himself able to express tenderness and vulnerability in simple, commanding images. And then, on "God's Own Jukebox," there's clear delight in the mysteries of three-chord rockabilly.

Jesse Winchester was never a navel-staring singer-songwriter who

believed his own introspection to be endlessly fascinating to others. He tried to engage the listener with his wit, and with those seemingly effortless couplets that had, in all likelihood, taken hours or days to fashion. A clue to what Jesse was trying for is offered in Juan Rodriguez's little essay. At home, Jesse is rereading Graham Greene, an author who, like Jesse, tried to walk the thin line between being meaningful yet accessible.

As a diversion, "Lullaby For The First Born" was a pastoral instrumental featuring Jesse on flute. "I read somewhere that somebody criticized Plato saying, 'You're too intellectual,'" said Jesse, "so he took up the flute. I said, 'Gee, that's neat.' So, slave to fashion that I am..."

By now, Jesse was starting to attract cover versions. Kenny Price had scored a fair-sized country hit with "Biloxi" from the first album. The Everly Brothers had cut "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," and Tim Hardin had cut "Yankee Lady." Delbert McClinton and, stranger yet, Wilson Pickett later picked "Isn't That So" from "Third Down". The reviews were still good, and the ever-fickle press was still saying nice things, but Jesse's albums weren't streaking out of the stores. The first album had been unavailable since Ampex pulled the plug on its record division, and "Third Down" suffered from Jesse's invisibility in the United States. Its low-key charms made it a tough sell to radio as well.

Rereading the journalism that accompanied "Third Down", one comes away with the impression that if success was to overtake Jesse Winchester, it would have to come to his home on Kensington Avenue in Montreal's NDG and drag him, kicking and screaming out of the front door. That's probably an unfair characterization; Jesse wanted a number one hit as badly as anyone in the business, but he was limited in his ability to influence the outcome; limited by the impossibility of touring the United States and by his own diffidence.

COLIN ESCOTT
Toronto, July 1994

Jesse and Leslie are looking out their back window, watching a neighbor in sweat clothes jog round and round under the overcast fall sky. It's the beginning of November and that guy must be cold out there. He must've been bugged, too, because Jesse was taking potshots with his brand new pellet gun. Jesse loves his pellet gun, "but if I were him I'd be getting a little uptight, too."

When the window is wide open like this, the bare trees in the park outside seem to step right inside. The radio blares away quietly. When he hears something he can play along with, Jesse reaches over for his flute. Pretty soon you can't hear the radio anymore, his flute is following his own course, and if it's not working out, Jesse switches stations quickly.

The table fills up fast, what with Jesse's well-thumbed Graham Greene pocket books and my fruit cake and Leslie's oysters. "Ugh," says Jesse, "How can you eat those things?" He catches her glance and she says, "Aw come on Jesse, they're great." Smiles all around. "Ugh," he says again in mock disgust, and he starts to fumble around with the Boursault cheese wrapping.

Montreal looms in the wintertime, the sun beams from the bright blue sky and reflects from the snow and the city streets glisten. Time to settle in, time to curl up with a good book, time for good talk and wine... A scratched-up Jerry Lee Lewis record is on Jesse's record player and the Canadians are playing hockey at the Forum tonight...

Juan Rodriguez (original liner notes)

