

JESSE WINCHESTER : LEARN TO LOVE IT



It looked cryptic. 'Learn To Love It' followed by Quebec's emblem, the fleur-de-lis. What was Jesse Winchester trying to tell us as the Parti Québécois loomed in background ready to take power in the province? Nothing specific about the tangled world of Quebec politics, as it happens; it was more a statement designed for general application. Accept your lot in life. Learn to love it. "...All the way down."

One encroaching reality that Jesse Winchester was learning to love was that, as good as his records and his songs were, he was not yet a star. He still had Albert Grossman - the owner of Bearsville - on his side. But, as formidable an ally as Grossman was, he couldn't lick Jesse's invisibility in the United States. In Canada, Jesse preferred coffee houses to halls. It's an old record business adage that you can look at a sheaf of sales statistics and tell who's touring and who's not. Jesse wouldn't be able to tour the United States for another three years, and wasn't flinging himself coast-to-coast in Canada.

In August 1974, the month *Learn To Love It* was released, President Ford made a proposal for a conditional amnesty that would involve community service for returning draft evaders and deserters. But Jesse wanted nothing less than total amnesty, and made it clear that Canada was now his home no matter what happened.

There was political commentary on *Learn*

To Love It. Perhaps, in retrospect, it was more a vote of thanks. "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," written and first recorded by Otis Jackson with the Evangelist Singers immediately after Roosevelt's death, was revised for Canada circa 1974. As Jesse almost certainly knew, the problem with political songs is that they're stamped with a sell-by date. Even recognizing this, he still felt the need to publicly record his gratitude to Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau for giving him sanctuary, and a new life that, judged by the front cover, seemed the picture of contentment.

Also for the first time, Jesse cut some non-originals. "Third Rate Romance" and "The End Is Not In Sight" were written by Russell Smith. Jesse had the first recording of "Third Rate Romance," which later became a hit for Smith and his Amazing Rhythm Aces.

"Russell Smith had played in a band with Butch McDade and Jeff Davis," says Jesse, "and they subsequently played with me. They brought me the songs. At one time there was a whole Tennessee contingent up here - a bunch of Tennesseans partying, hanging out and playing music, and that's how I found the songs. Butch and Jeff Davis went back to form The Amazing Rhythm Aces, which was a progression from the band name that we had - The Rhythm Aces."

"Third Rate Romance" was cut by Russell Smith at the Sun studio in Memphis, and it became a Top 20 hit in 1975 despite the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time subject matter.

At the other end of the moral spectrum, Jesse cut the old Martha Carson gospel

standard, "I Can't Stand Up Alone." It was one of several songs in which Jesse probed his thinking on religion. The album opener, "Wake Me," was another. It had a twisted take on the second coming:

"They say He'll pass again this way
But I can't believe He'll come today,
Because the weather's bad and the roads
are rough,
And you'd think by now He'd had enough."

It all reflected Jesse's ambivalence toward organized religion. And this, you must remember, was years before high profile evangelists were being caught with their pants at their ankles. "Christianity has grown way past what Jesus might have intended," Jesse told interviewer Howard Druckman. "On the days I do believe in God, He's a forgiving father, who understands and loves us...if He exists."

If there had been any justice for a southern boy a long way from home, "Defying Gravity" would have been a Top 10 record. The words and music have that magic blend that songwriters stay awake nights dreaming about and trying for. Emmylou Harris and Waylon Jennings later recorded it, but only Jesse's invisibility in the United States could have kept his own version from the charts. "Mississippi You're On My Mind" was also a hit for someone else, in this case the black country singer Stoney Edwards. Later, Barrence Whitfield covered it. Neither version had the exile's unrequited longing, though, and that's what makes the original so compelling.

Writing in French was another departure for Jesse. It was, he concedes now, a gesture, and one he found difficult to the point that he later gave it up. "Laisser Les Bons Temps Rouler" really owed more to Cajun music than to anything Jesse had heard in Quebec. "L'Air De La Louisiane," in contrast, has an island feel.

Like most of Jesse's music, this has aged well. Jesse Winchester, the babe in arms on the front cover, is now in his early twenties. Was 1974 really that long ago?

COLIN ESCOTT
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Produced by Jesse Winchester
Thanks to Amos Garrett, Guitar,
and John Rigby, strings
Engineered by Chuck Gray
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Dedicated to Tim Clarke, Si Dardick,
and Chaim Propinator

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