

# Jesse Winchester

## LET THE ROUGH SIDE DRAG

Some would say that the hour was getting late for Jesse Winchester by the time of this, his fourth album. Critical acclaim had never been in short supply, but critics are hard-pressed to pay their own rent, never mind someone else's. The long-anticipated, big breakthrough hadn't materialized. More and more singers were picking up on Jesse's songs (there aren't, after all, many songwriters who have had their songs cut by Wilson Pickett and Raffi). But, as gratifying as the covers were, Jesse himself was still an underground figure.

Everyone seemed to be trying a little bit harder to change that state-of-play on **Let The Rough Side Drag**. Albert Grossman, who owned Bearsville Records, seemed willing to commit whatever it took. "Albert wanted to sell a lot of records," said Jesse, "but no more than I did. I've always wanted to be a commercial artist, oddly enough. I wanted to be The Drifters; I didn't want to be a serious folk artist. Anything I thought was commercial, I was all for."

Jesse, who had produced the two previous albums singlehandedly, now got second and third opinions from Marty Harris, his longtime bass player, and Chuck Gray, a U.S. Army deserter who ran the little home studio where Jesse had cut his first demos. There were at least half-a-dozen songs on this album that Top 40 radio could and should have learned to love.

Unlike many artists who write the majority of their own material, Jesse wasn't lapsing into self-parody by the fourth time out. Far from it; he was now one of the most accomplished songwriters in popular music. His work was varied, concise, and resonant. "I don't listen to what's out there, consciously trying to copy it," he says, "although I'm sure it affects me. I'm more affected by what I heard when I was a kid as far as inspiration. When I go for inspiration, I want those old grooves. It is a commercial discipline in so far as I want it to make sense and cohere, and I want it to be catchy, and yet - if someone cares to really listen - that there be some meat in there somewhere. I have to take what comes. I can't write to order, although I wish I could. Like, I envy people who can write for movies. It's a real gift."

Good songs don't date, and Jesse consciously tried not to locate his songs to a specific place and time. "I'd like to be thought of as a classicist," he told Doug Pringle. "A classicist in the sense that the songs aren't affected by fashion. I don't want to use words that have only come to mean something in the last few years, like 'Far out' or 'Right on!'"

The presence of the steel guitar seemed to signify that Jesse and Albert Grossman had at least one eye on the market that Emmylou Harris had opened up for left-of-centre country music. Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings were also stretching the boundaries of country music to the point that there might have been room for Jesse, who was, in a sense, the only true outlaw in the bunch. On "Everybody Knows But Me" he gave a new, and long overdue, humorous spin to that oldest of country traditions: the cheatin' song.

By way of a concession to Albert Grossman, Jesse rerecorded "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," his first song and his own least favourite. The original had been unavailable in the United States since Ampex Records folded in 1971, yet it was still attracting cover versions. Grossman felt that someone was going to have a big country hit with it soon, and it might as well be the writer. Jesse wasn't going to be pigeonholed into the country market, though. **Let The Rough Side Drag** was firmly within what Jesse thought of as the mainstream of popular music. It stood head and shoulders above the navel-gazing singer-songwriters of the day, but the commercial equation produced the wrong answer, as it so often does.

Jesse went twice to England to support the album, but it was the era of Elton John and Gary Glitter and what should have been natural Jesse Winchester territory never opened up. He toured across Canada too, talking to the press as he went. Jimmy Carter was elected just as the album was released, extending the possibility of an unconditional pardon for draft evaders and deserters. Everywhere he went, he was asked the same question: What if...? Jesse always said he was overjoyed at the prospect of being able to go back to Memphis, but he made it clear that Montreal was now his home, come what may.

COLIN ESCOTT  
- Toronto, July 1994

#### MUSICIANS

JESSE WINCHESTER: VOCALS, GUITAR,  
KEYBOARDS, FLUTE  
MARTY HARRIS: BASS, BACKGROUND VOCALS  
CHRIS CASTLE: DRUMS:  
BOB COHEN: GUITAR:  
CHRISTIAN ST. ROCH: DRUMS:  
MAURICE BEAUCHAMP: KEYBOARDS:  
RON DANN: PEDAL STEEL:  
CARLISLE MILLER: SAX  
BRUCE MURCHISON: VIOLIN  
KEN PEARSON: PIANO  
DON HABIB: BASS  
BOB LUCIER: PEDAL STEEL  
LORI ZIMMERMAN: BACKGROUND VOCALS  
SHARON RYAN: BACKGROUND VOCALS  
PAUL BUTTERFIELD: HARMONICA

PRODUCED BY: JESSE WINCHESTER,  
MARTY HARRIS AND CHUCK GRAY  
ENGINEERED BY: CHUCK GRAY  
RECORDED AT: STUDIO SIX, MONTREAL  
FRONT COVER PHOTO BY: J. WINCHESTER  
BACK COVER PHOTO BY: RICHARD YOUNG  
REISSUE PRODUCER: HOLGER PETERSEN  
REISSUE DESIGNER: ROB STORESHAW

DEDICATED TO:  
JAMES RIDOUT WINCHESTER, SR., MY FATHER

Originally released as BR 6964 BEARVILLE

© Bearsville Records 1976  
P Stony Plain Records 1995

Made in Canada

Manufactured by Stony Plain Recording Company Ltd.  
P.O. Box 861, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6J 2L8  
Write for a free catalogue.