

A Little Bit of Dixie in the Cool Blue North

By Leslie & Michael Goldberg

If there was ever a man who seemed predestined to be a singer/songwriter/musician it is draft-resister-turned-Canadian-citizen Jesse Winchester. His career has been riddled by strange lurches of fate. The strangest lurch of all, of course, was the Vietnam War.

Rather than be drafted, Winchester, at age 22, fled to Canada in January of 1967, arriving with only two hundred dollars in his pocket.

“I had never considered music as a profession until I was forced to,” reflected Winchester between sets in the dark, smokey Boarding House bar [in San Francisco] last week. “I tried to find a straight job when I moved to Canada in some kind of business or something. I wanted to show good faith to the Canadian government, that I was not going to be a ward of the state. So I looked around for a legitimate job and couldn’t find one.

“People heard my southern accent and wanted to know what I was doing there and when I told them they were kind of wary of hiring me. So music was the only thing I knew how to do that I knew I could make a living at. So I was pretty well forced into it.”

He hooked up with a Canadian rock and roll band, Les Astronauts. During the following two years Jesse was in and out of bands, writing songs and building a following in the clubs and bars of Montreal. Through fortunate circumstances Jesse happened to meet up with The Band’s Robbie Robertson.

“Robbie was a friend of a friend of the girl I was living with. He and I met in the basement of a church in Ottawa where I was working on a tape. So this friend I was speaking of brought Robbie down and he had just put out *Music From Big Pink* with his band So I was very impressed by him and very thrilled to meet him,” said Jesse, a softspoken, exceedingly polite man who neither drinks nor smokes.

“Robbie liked what we’d been doing. He decided we’d make a demo tape in a real studio and he would take it to Albert Grossman (Dylan’s former manager) which is what happened.”

Apparently Robertson, a Canadian himself with a fascination with the South, was much taken by Jesse’s heartfelt songs about his homeland.

The Winchester family has a strong southern heritage which is evoked in many of Jesse’s songs. Jesse was born on May 17, 1944 in Shreveport, Louisiana. The Winchesters are connected to the Robert E. Lee family and Jesse’s fifth great – grandfather helped Andrew Jackson found Memphis. His grandfather gave the funeral oration at Memphis jazzman W. C. Handy’s funeral.

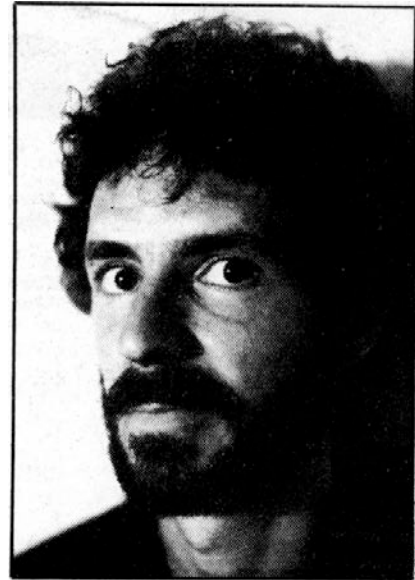


Photo by Michael Goldberg, 1977

Jesse's father was the first "radical" of the family. He hated World War II and initially rejected a legal career to work the land. "He was one of the original hippies in the late Forties," said Winchester. "He took up farming to get closer to the land."

Although Jesse insists on his Canadian loyalty, he is proud of the South and has turned to it for his songwriting inspiration. Perhaps his exile in Canada has fueled the fires of this great passion.

"I think I hear a noisy-old John Deer/
In a field specked with dirty cotton lint/
And below the field runs a little shady creek/
And there you'll find the cool green leaves of mint/
Mississippi you're on my mind/
Mississippi you're on my mind/
Oh, Mississippi you're on, my mind." —
"Mississippi You're On My Mind"

Jesse Winchester is one of the best contemporary songwriters working today. Not only do songs like "Mississippi, You're On My Mind" evoke crystal clear images and moods of the South, but his good natured songs about relationships transcend the merely personal to the universal.

"I'm no good company/
I guess that's true/
I like my silence/
Like I love you/
But if you feel like talkin'/
Talk away/
I'm gonna hang on/
Every word you say." — "Every Word You Say"

Although many of the songs on Jesse's five albums are about the South, until recently he has had no way to tour the U.S. and thus expose his music. Despite highly favorable reviews of each album, starting with his first (and only) Robbie Robertson produced album, *Jesse Winchester*, right up to his latest, *Nothing But a Breeze*, Jesse was unable to sell many records. He lived off club work and the royalties that came in from versions of his songs, "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," "Isn't That So," "Yankee Lady" and "Mississippi, You're On My Mind" recorded by better known artists including Joan Baez, Jimmy Buffett, the Everly Brothers and even Wilson Pickett. Carter's amnesty was welcomed because it allowed Jesse to tour the U.S. for the first time and promote his records.

We caught two of Winchester's many sold out shows at the Boarding House. Drawing from each of his albums, Winchester presented a powerful, cohesive performance that far surpassed his best recorded efforts. His was one of the best club appearances so far this year. The Midnight Bus, his terrific band, glided easily from Nashville-style country to funky blues and moody ballads.

Winchester's sense of humor, a side seldom revealed on record, balanced the serious tone of many of the songs. For a new tune, "Rhumba Man," Jesse danced, bopped and gestured comically as he sang about the joys of doing the Rhumba.

Winchester's tour through the U.S. has been wildly successful. Still, he feels uncomfortable with all the fanfare and his notoriety as the draft-dodging songwriter. "My feelings are ambivalent," he admitted freely. "On one hand I know that a lot of publicity has come to me because of it and on the other hand I think it would be just in the worst possible taste to purposely capitalize on something like that. So I'm benefiting from an ugly thing. And it's a fine, delicate line to tread and I just have to try extra hard to do the right thing, say the right thing all the time, be as forthright as I can on the subject.

"I'd like to be able to forget the whole thing. But on the other hand I can't pretend it didn't happen. I just have to play it by ear and do the best I can. My job at the moment is to play the

best music I can and I think if I do that, eventually it will be the thing that will stand. I really have to concentrate on that and let the political stuff do what it will.”

Jesse, his French-Canadian wife Leslie, 26, and their two children, James, 5 and Alice, 2, make Montreal their home. Jesse became a Canadian citizen in 1973.

“I feel that can’t come back to the U.S. to live because I made a decision to move to Canada and not away from the United States. So I’m doing my best to be a good Canadian. I have nothing against the United States. I love the United State and always will. But my loyalties lie with Canada now. I’m very grateful to the country and I want to be a good citizen.”

When asked what he meant by the key lines of the title track of his new album “Me, I want to live with my feet in Dixie/ And my head in the cool blue North, Jesse explained, “It’s just talking about how people want to have their cake all eat it too. You kinda want both sides of things and it’s hard to make up your mind, that’s all.”

- By Leslie & Michael Goldberg

1977 interview with Jesse Winchester, when I was a young music critic, and Leslie and I were freelancing for underground publications including the Berkeley Barb, the San Francisco Bay Guardian, as well as some local and national magazines. - Michael Goldberg