



A Conversation with Mac McAnally on Jesse Winchester

Mike Ragogna: Mac, let's talk about Jesse Winchester. You produced his album *A Reasonable Amount Of Trouble* that are his final recordings. How did you get through it? It must have hit you in a much different way than producing any other album in your life.

Mac McAnally: Well, certainly. The whole premise initially was that Jesse had been sick, we did the tribute album during the time that he was sick, and right before we began this final project he was actually given a clean bill of health. The prognosis at that point was good, but he had these songs that were written during the feeling of imminent death. There was sort of a heavy overtone to the songs he had written. He was concerned because he was generally not a heavy, morose guy; he always had a sense of humor about everything. If you know his work, you know there's always some pathos and always some humor and always some real life in any Jesse Winchester song. That's why he's one of my heroes. He can make you laugh and cry in the same song.

MIKE: Were there any songs on this album that particularly hit you hard?

MAC: When we agreed to do the record, I hadn't heard any songs. It's not like I doubt whether Jesse's going to bring any good songs to the table, but I was not aware, musically, of anything other than that we were going to cut some Jesse Winchester songs. We played a little show together, and literally the way that I heard the beginning of this pile of material was sitting there on the stage with him in a regular Nashville guitar pool sense of the word, "Here, play a solo over this little thing called "Just So Much The Lord Can Do,"" and it hit me like a big iron skillet, because I know what he's been through. "Every Day I Get The Blues" is that, "Ghosts" is that. I'm always a fan of his lighthearted stuff, "Never Forget To Boogie," "She Makes It Easy Now," that's sort of classic, right-down-the-middle fastball Jesse Winchester. He was as good at the end of his life as he was at the beginning. He has a quality record across his body of work that you wouldn't bring up a lot of peers in the same category. Everybody's best work is pretty good, but whatever you would deem to be Jesse's least significant work is really good.

MIKE: Was he simply able to say things in a way that resonated better than other artists?

MAC: He was verbally economic. He didn't use a lot of words. He took great care in saying the right ones. I don't know if you saw the liner notes, but his little quote from our songwriting seminar down there will stick with me forever. Somebody asked him what he thought was the secret to songwriting and he just said, "Say what needs saying and then try not to say anything else."

MIKE: That's a great line.

MAC: You can pick any chart on *Billboard* and if all of the songwriters on that chart paid attention to that one little thing, it would be an infinitely better chart.

MIKE: [laughs] Nice.

MAC: And I'm not throwing down anybody! I'm throwing myself in the same fire. How many of us go past what needs saying to keep talking?

MIKE: The economy of words is not something everybody has.

MAC: It's true. At any rate, I'm elaborating past what you've asked me. He's influenced me in that way. I'm a fan of all of his work, and this particular body of work because how it went down will stick with me just like how one special song would stick with me otherwise. In the beginning we were recording this because it was a happy time and he had the good diagnosis. He was still weak from the chemo and all that, he was saying, "Let's wait a little while until I get stronger, I'll come back and I'll beat some of these vocals that I've sang live on the tracks and I'll feel stronger and I'll sing better." Even though he was weak, he was Jesse Winchester. No one was disappointed with his vocals on the tracks, but he was. He wanted to sing stronger. So we waited around for him to get stronger, he played a few shows, but he just didn't ever get stronger. His back started getting worse. So we went from waiting on him to get stronger to really hurrying to get finished. He came down to Mussel Shoals in January and we started doing backgrounds together. We did a couple of days together and he was just getting weaker and weaker. He drove himself down there. He didn't like to fly.

Two days into singing backgrounds he was like, "Mac, I don't have it. We're going to have to go with the vocals we've got." They were a lot better than he remembered them being anyway, but he said, "You're going to have to finish the backgrounds. You're going to have to finish the project, I'm just giving you the baton. You go." He said, "I feel like it's in good hands." I took that very seriously because I'm only a record producer if somebody asks me to do that. I don't think of myself in those terms. I've worn all the other hats; I've played guitar and produced and written and sang backgrounds and arranged and been the guy that goes and gets the cheeseburgers while better people do all those things. For somebody that I respect that much to say, "Here, I'm giving it to you, do it like I would do it," that's as serious as I've ever taken record production. We worked and hurried to get finished as his health declined and it really became a race for him to get to hear it, which we did. By the time we sent him the final mixed and mastered version he was so weak that he had to keep it for about a week and a half before he could even listen to it. He did a little listening party with his family, he set up speakers--he wanted to do all

that by himself so he waited until he was strong enough--and he sent me a letter, an email letter that I will keep all my life, that's as nice of a thing that anybody's ever said to me about any work that I ever did.

MIKE: What did he say?

MAC: He said, "I don't talk in these terms, but we killed this thing. I wouldn't change a single note. You're a blessing to help get this done." He said it was the most he'd ever enjoyed the recording process. Traditionally recording has not been an enjoyable thing for Jesse. He was a performer more than a studio guy, but anyway all those things mean the world to me because I did take very seriously being the stand-in Jesse at the end of the run. It's not like I'm singing lead vocals, I didn't write any songs, but I was trying to take care of them as if they were my own. It was obvious at that point that they were the final thing he was going to say to the world.

MIKE: That's a lot of weight on everybody's shoulders. I guess the mission is what got you through it, right?

MAC: That was it. I wanted his approval, and if I didn't have it I wanted to know what I needed to do to have it. All these final decisions were me, so I wanted him to be able to hear it and I wanted there to be enough time to make whatever changes he thought there would need to be. He's a very particular guy so I was actually assuming that there was going to be stuff. "Move this mix, I don't like this guitar you played," whatever. I was ready for all of that. But it was a race, because he was going down fast. To get that at the end is a high-five unlike other high-fives that I've ever gotten in my life. I've been a very blessed guy. The amount of rejection that most guys my age have run into in show business--that's been a particular blessing for me because I'm such a bashful kid, if anybody had told me to go home really anywhere along the way I would have. Almost everybody here has heard, "Hey son, you're not good enough to do this; you should go home and do something else." I would've done it. I wasn't very ambitious myself; I always wanted to make music but I never considered myself somebody who was going to make a living at it. It was just something I loved to do, and it still is. I've been very blessed that way, and for Jesse to give me zero demerits on it is pretty great. I looked at it honestly like a junior high school kid, trying to impress his teachers and his girlfriend and his parents all at the same time.

MIKE: [laughs] I imagine you and Jesse got along well musically because neither of you are nailed to a specific genre as singer-songwriters. And you produce, write songs, play guitar on sessions...

MAC: If somebody hires me as a guitar player, I do my best, but I'm working for the singer who hired me. When you're a producer you are responsible to a record label and you're responsible to the artist whose name is going to be on the front of the record, and I care about both of those things because I've been both of those things. Honestly as a producer I feel like I'm working for the music. That's who I'm responsible to. In the case of Jesse, I loved him and I revered him but it still doesn't change the job. If I look at "Just So Much The Lord Can Do," even though that is kind of a right cross to the nose, I'm working for that song and I want it to be as big of a right cross to the nose as it can possibly be. It's Jesse's real life and he's a brilliant writer and that's a brilliant song. I take that responsibility to that song pretty

seriously, as he did obviously, and as you say, I'm a writer too, so I value the song and I appreciate who it was that wrote it and how they did it.

MIKE: That's beautiful. What was your first reaction when you listened to this album as a finished project?

MAC: One of the decisions that he left on me was to sequence it. He a lot of doo-wop stuff when he was a kid, and those songs meant a lot to him. He wrote a lot of songs like that. He wanted to lighten the heavy tone of songs that he'd written during his treatment, so we sang a couple of these doo-wop songs. Honestly, if you go top to bottom in this album and you look at the pile of songs, you could've sequenced it a lot of different ways and made it more serious or more light, but that was the trickiest thing about it, and I had no help doing it. That was the main thing that I was worried the most about; whether it would have a flow to it. We had been so down in between the hi hat cymbals and the strings of the guitar making sure everything was as good as we could make it that in the final analysis, listening to the album all the way across it's a little bit of a celebration of a great American artist, and I hear that. Honestly I don't take any credit for that, but I'm glad to have been around as it happened. I do hear that in that sequence. It doesn't play to me like a morose guy who was sick. I'm close to him, so I can have a little different perspective than a first listener like yourself has been, but that's the main thing that I've been proud of. It plays like it's got some joy and some sadness and some compassion for both of those things along the way.

MIKE: Beautiful.



Mike Ragogna
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