

Jesse Winchester- More Than Just a Showman



MORE THAN JUST A SHOWMAN THE MUSICAL JOURNEY OF JESSE WINCHESTER AN INTERVIEW FROM 2006

Acknowledged as one of the finest songwriters of his generation, Winchester is in his fifth decade as a performer. His catalog of 11 albums, (ten recorded in the studio and one live), representing 35 years of his songs, remains one of the most consistent and coherent bodies of work from any musical artist in the last 50 years.

The music may have a linear feel to it: Winchester's path has not. He was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and raised in Memphis. After spending some time in Massachusetts and Munich, Winchester moved to Montreal in 1967 to avoid the draft, something he spoke about in the song "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt:"

"'Cos I'm baptized by water
So I'll pass on the one by fire
If you want to fight
Go on and fight if that be your desire"

Reliving History

Avoiding the draft altered his life forever, something Winchester has always acknowledged. With recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan, he finds the feelings of forty years ago still resonate.

"I do feel a great sadness, and am distressed about our country. You have to wonder do we really ever learn the lessons. This time, though, there at least are some differences, and in our response at home; we haven't made some of the same mistakes. Back in the sixties, we didn't pull any punches. Then we made mistakes by blaming the soldiers who fought in Viet Nam. But still, the war is the exact same cultural argument from then, which never got resolved."

Winchester retains his southern accent and manner. His conversation is leavened with gracious gentility, and he often adds "why, thank you" and "bless your soul" at the end of his comments, or in reaction to a compliment.

He has made the transition from the warmth of Mississippi to the cool frosty air of Montreal.

"It's gotten so that I actually look forward to winter. After all the grey dreariness of November, you long for the beauty of the snow."

His songs are noted for their wry humor, poetic twists, and poignant, sometimes aching timbre. They are songs about disappointment, about living with choices made in life; as well as wistful memories of times and places that are lost forever. Winchester is also known for his astonishing economy of language.

The Songwriter's Songwriter

"I am a very slow songwriter," he says. "I edit severely. Even the stuff that I write that I like gets edited down to the absolute bare bones. Over time, I've become more conscious about what I want to say."

"There are so many people that I admire, so I can look at what they've done and still learn. Harlan Howard, Hoagy Carmicheal, Johnny Mercer. All of these wonderful songwriters who've gone before help me to be a better writer. Maybe when I was younger, I'd write a tune that was 'Bob Dylan' cryptic, more stream of consciousness. "Brand New Tennessee Waltz" was like that. I guess I don't really do that anymore."

As some of his most poignant tunes show, Winchester remains deeply rooted in his southern childhood. Songs he has written about the south, "Biloxi," "Mississippi You're On My Mind," and "Bowling Green" have been covered by artists as diverse as the Everly Brothers and Jimmy Buffet.

Winchester can plant his tongue firmly in cheek, however. In "Let the Rough Side Drag," he manages to be both wry and ribald simultaneously.

"It's a good thing the sea's not dry
Such a good thing that cows don't fly
What a good thing to make a joyful noise
It's a good thing that beds don't talk..."

"A Blessed Thing"

Winchester's ability to tour the United States was made possible by President Jimmy Carter's 1976 amnesty of Viet-Nam era draft-evaders.

"That was such a blessed thing. It had such an impact on my life, and that of my family. Huge."

The amnesty opened up the possibility of returning to the United States to promote the albums he was producing during the late seventies and early eighties. A songwriter's songwriter, Winchester was beloved by a small but devoted base of fans, which hasn't really translate into robust album sales.

"Well, let's say I haven't gotten rich from any of the albums. A couple of songs have done real well for me, which gave me a chance to step back and figure out what I wanted to do."

By the late nineties, Winchester had stopped touring and going into the studio. He simply

wasn't enjoying it anymore. The difficulties of constant road life, the breakup of his marriage and other struggles sent him in a different direction. He had been offering nuggets of insight to his fans through his songs for years ("A Showman's Life" and "Little Glass of Wine"); he decided to concentrate on his songwriting.

"I wasn't having fun. It had become just 'doing something.' You see, when you're enjoying it, it's like the lights come on when you step on the stage. It's like magic. Time stops and you're in this moment with the audience."

"Real true music is a performing art. It's evanescent, it lasts for that moment you are up there and the audience is tuned in. It shouldn't be frustrating, and it was."

When the Spirit Moves

A recurring theme in Winchester's music is a spiritual dialogue; an ongoing conversation versed in both testaments, occasionally borrowing from the deep and rich style of spirituals. This is a conversation that shares lessons, and doesn't preach.

Winchester is animated when he discusses it.

"Spirit is important to me. It means a lot. I also value doubts as much as faith. We lose something as human beings without doubters to challenge us and make us think. I guess on that final day, I'd be lining up with the faithful."

"Peter Ustinov once said that humanity was divided by faith and united by our doubts. I couldn't put it any better than that."

Winchester is now ready to return to the stage.

"Yeah" he admits. "I want to keep on getting after that kick of doing it right. I guess I'm crazy for that pleasure of getting it right, of getting the respect of my fans."

Jesse Winchester, after 11 albums, 35 winters in Montreal with his feet in the Mississippi mud, is also a pragmatic wanderer who recognizes when the deck is stacked and fate is rumbling. Appropriately, on his 1972 tune "Do It," he offers sage advice and a shy, winning smile.

"If the wheel is fixed
I would still take a chance
If we're treading on thin ice
Then we might as well dance"

Indeed. Come on out and dance, and sing a joyful song.

CD REVIEW:

**LIVE FROM MOUNTAIN STAGE!
Jesse Winchester
Blue Plate Special
2001**

www.jessewinchester.com/

Jesse Winchester, alone on stage with his guitar, is a magical performer. This show-stealing set recorded in 2001 showcases his animated percussive guitar-plucking style contrasted with his sweet, sweet tenor. Wrapping those two gifts around some of his best tunes, the package offers a terrific sample of the work of Winchester.

His sly, self-effacing stage presence is not as evident on the disc, but his facility with a sharply-turned lyric, coupled with simple and haunting melodies make this a joy to listen to. Winchester opens the set with two songs that are utter bookends; "Eulalie," which finds him on the sideline mooning over the prettiest girl in town who doesn't even notice him, and the delightful "Foolish Heart," where he's strolling down Main Street, with another pretty girl admiring him, much to his delighted confusion.

The set also features some other classic Winchester tunes- "Little Glass of Wine," "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," and "Yankee Lady."

It serves as a good introduction to the estimable singer songwriter, and it'll do until you get the chance to see him live.



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