

THE
Commercial Appeal
MEMPHIS

Memphis Bred - Jesse Winchester dies

Bob Mehr - April 11, 2014



One of music's sweetest voices and most incisive songwriters, Jesse Winchester, has died. The 69 year-old — who had been battling cancer — passed away at his home in Charlottesville, Va., on Friday morning according to his wife, Cindy Winchester.

The mellifluous-voiced author of "The Brand New Tennessee Waltz," "Mississippi, You're on My Mind" and "Biloxi," the Memphis-raised Winchester had long been a favorite of critics and fellow musicians, covered by a wide array of artists from Wilson Pickett to the Everly Brothers, Jerry Garcia to Reba McEntire. Bob Dylan was famously quoted as saying of Mr. Winchester: "You can't talk about the best songwriters and not include him." In 2007, Mr. Winchester was recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award from performing rights organization ASCAP for his body of work.

Though James Ridout Winchester was born in Louisiana, spent the bulk of his career in Canada and lived in Virginia for the last decade of his life, he always considered himself a Memphian. Record company publicity used to trumpet the fact that he was a distant relative of Confederate general Robert E. Lee; that he was kin to Memphis' founding mayor Marcus Winchester; and that his grandfather gave the eulogy at W.C. Handy's funeral.

"My whole family is from Memphis originally," Mr. Winchester told The Commercial Appeal, before his final appearance in town last December. "My dad got out of the Second World War and decided he wanted to be a farmer, though he knew nothing about it. He was an early back-to-the-land hippie person in that respect. So he moved us to Mississippi and bought a tiny farm on the Alabama line. We lived on a series of farms until Dad had a heart attack that was serious enough to make him stop doing heavy labor. So we all moved back to Memphis, and he went to law school."

Mr. Winchester arrived in the Bluff City in 1956 at the impressionable age of 12, just as the R&B and rock and roll scenes were exploding. "That was a big time in Memphis and music because of Elvis," he recalled. "He got everything happening. Like a lot of white kids in Memphis, I was into R&B more than anything. People kept saying Elvis was making 'black music,' but I thought he was playing country music. I liked it, I loved it, but it didn't strike me as being black.

"The things I was into was Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker and gospel music. I listened to WDIA with Nat D. Williams., and B.B. King was a disc jockey, too. Plus, I loved the music coming down from the Northeast, like doo-wop. That really got to me in a big way, and I've never escaped it."

He began playing music as a teenager, while attending Christian Brothers High School. His

role model was guitarist Steve Cropper, of Booker T. & the MGs fame. "We had Booker T. and the MGs here in Memphis, which was two white kids and two black kids playing together, making fantastic music," recalled Mr. Winchester in an oral history interview for Rhodes College in 2010. "And I wanted to be like Steve Cropper, or a white kid playing black music, so bad. And it affected my playing, too, that very deliberate funky style that he had, very, very simple."

Mr. Winchester enrolled at Williams College in Massachusetts, where he studied German and planned to follow his father's footsteps and attend law school. But the turmoil of the 1960s changed that. After a time studying abroad in Munich, Germany and playing in bands overseas, he returned to Williams to graduate, then back to Memphis, where he received his draft notice.

Though he likely would've been exempted or been declared 4-F, he chose to take a stand and became one of approximately 100,000 draft-eligible young men who left the United States during the Vietnam War in protest. Winchester moved to Montreal, Canada, where he would spend the next 35 years. "You make your bed and you lie in it," Winchester told *The Commercial Appeal* in 2008 of his decision to oppose the war and leave the country.

In Canada, Winchester launched himself as a professional musician, playing in a series of bands before finding his voice as a solo singer-songwriter. He was befriended by Robbie Robertson of *The Band*, who produced Winchester's critically acclaimed eponymous 1970 debut.

Though he was initially lumped into the '70s singer-songwriter movement, and occasionally was tagged as a folk artist, he was, at heart, a popular tunesmith in the purest sense. "I've always thought of myself as a pop person, though I can see why some folks thought, 'Oh, here comes another bearded white guy with a guitar,'" said Mr. Winchester.

Mr. Winchester continued to release a series of exquisite albums throughout the decade — working with producers like Todd Rundgren and Willie Mitchell — but his career was hampered by his inability to tour the U.S. because of his draft situation, thus consigning him to critical and cult favorite status (newly elected President Jimmy Carter pardoned him, along with other anti-war protesters, as part of an amnesty in early 1977).

While he never scaled the pop charts, Mr. Winchester was revered by his fellow musicians. His work would be covered by an incredible array of artists across the decades, including Bonnie Raitt, Waylon Jennings, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Ralph Stanley and Elvis Costello.

Though he kept a lower public profile for parts of the '80s and '90s, focusing instead on raising his family, he returned to the studio periodically, as with 1988's *Humor Me* and 1999's *Gentleman of Leisure*.

Recent years had seen Mr. Winchester enjoy a major career renaissance. In 2009, following the release of an acclaimed "comeback" album *Love Filling Station*, he made a high-profile appearance on the Elvis Costello television show "Spectacle." His moving performance left both the audience and his fellow artists in tears. "I just bowed my head," Costello would note, "and told the audience that they had to go home because I could not gather myself to make the next introduction, such was supernatural beauty of his voice."

In 2011, Mr. Winchester was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. "At the time I got sick, I had more bookings than I'd had in a while," he recalled. "And the disease happened right in the middle of it."

As Mr. Winchester went through surgery and recovered, a group of friends and fellow artists, spearheaded by Jimmy Buffett recorded a collection of his songs for a tribute album called *Quiet About It*. Featuring performances of Winchester's material by the likes of James Taylor, Rosanne Cash, Lyle Lovett, Lucinda Williams and Costello, among others, it was confirmation of his standing among his musical and songwriting peers. "When that tribute

record happened, I was truly gratified by it," said Winchester. "But I had so many kind things said to me by complete strangers during my (illness). Providence works out to where you go through something like that, and those are the things you remember. Which is a blessing, isn't it?"

Winchester was eventually given a clean bill of health and returned to performing for a period of time. He had completed a new album, *A Reasonable Amount of Trouble*, with producer Mac McAnally, comprised of songs written during his illness (the record is expected to be released later this year).

But in February of 2014, the cancer had returned, this time in his bladder, and proved inoperable. Winchester spent his final days at home in hospice care. "As we like to say, he's still teaching us a thing or two about dignity and grace," said his wife Cindy at the time. "Those that know him will know that's a big part of who he is. He's a dignified gentleman."

In early April, several blogs and Twitter accounts reported his death in error, setting off a wave of premature tributes. "Elvis Costello sent me a lovely condolence note," said Cindy. "When he learned that the rumor of Jesse's death [was] false, Elvis replied, 'Jesse continues to be a very surprising fellow.'"

Mr. Winchester finally succumbed to the disease on Friday. He is survived by his wife, a brother, Cassius Winchester, and a sister, Ellyn Weeks, as well as his children, James Winchester, Alice Winchester, and Marcus Lee Winchester, a stepdaughter, Jennifer Slingerup, and five grandchildren.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~