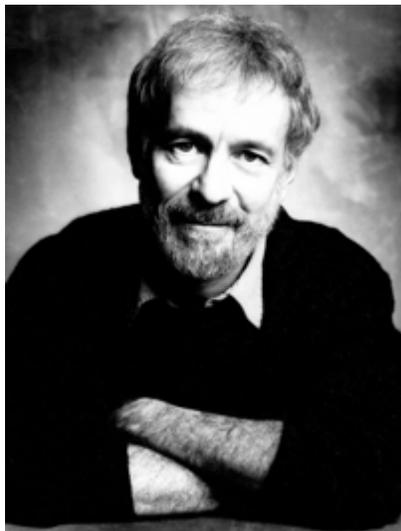


THE TENNESSEAN

Songsmith Jesse Winchester dies at 69

Peter Cooper, pcooper@tennessean.com APRIL 12, 2014



Jesse Winchester, the Memphis-reared musician whose elegant and playful songs were recorded by Emmylou Harris, Vince Gill, Rosanne Cash, George Strait, The Everly Brothers, Waylon Jennings, The O'Kanes, Jimmy Buffett, Ted Hawkins and many more, died Friday, April 11 at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was 69, and had long battled cancer.

Born in Louisiana, Mr. Winchester spent his early years in Mississippi. His family moved to Memphis in 1956, and Mr. Winchester fell under the sway of the Bluff City's rock 'n' roll and rhythm & blues music. He was particularly enamored of guitarist Steve Cropper, and he later incorporated Cropper's soulful, relaxed approach to guitar in his own playing.

In 1967, after graduating from Williams College in Massachusetts, Mr. Winchester received his draft notice. He moved to Montreal to avoid fighting in Vietnam, and began performing in small Canadian clubs and coffee houses. Robbie Robertson of The Band produced Winchester's 1970 debut album, and his songs won favor with critics and other musicians, but Winchester's inability to tour in the United States halted his popular momentum.

"I just didn't feel that I was so right and anybody else was so wrong that I should pick up a gun and shoot him for it," Mr. Winchester told Frank Rose of "Rolling Stone" in 1977.

In 1974, Mr. Winchester joined with Jeff "Stick" Davis and Butch McDade to form Jesse Winchester and the Rhythm Aces, a band that would become The Amazing Rhythm Aces after Russel Smith took over the lead vocalist role.

In 1977, U.S. President Jimmy Carter granted Mr. Winchester amnesty, allowing him to finally tour in the United States. That year, Mr. Winchester released the Brian Ahern-produced "Nothing but a Breeze," which featured contributions from Harris, Ricky Skaggs, Anne Murray and others.

That album, like the ones that preceded it and the ones that followed, did not bring Mr. Winchester wealth or ubiquity, but it cemented his reputation as a songwriter of depth and consequence. Harris' 1978 recordings of Mr. Winchester's "My Songbird" and "Defying Gravity" bolstered that reputation, though lengthy stints away from the studio (he released two albums in the 1980s and only one in the 1990s) hindered his progress as a recording artist.

Mr. Winchester's 1999 album, "Gentleman of Leisure," broke a seven-year recording hiatus and featured Nashville-based musicians including Gill, The Fairfield Four, Mike Henderson, John Cowan and Jonell Mosser. He moved back to the United States in 2002, and in 2009 he

released the Bil VornDick-produced, critically acclaimed "Love Filling Station."

After Mr. Winchester was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 2011, Mac McAnally produced a multi-artist tribute album called "Quiet About It," with tracks from Buffett, Elvis Costello, James Taylor, Lyle Lovett and other admirers. Mr. Winchester moved past that initial cancer battle, and he reportedly completed another album, due for release later in 2014. By February of 2014, the cancer was back, and it had spread.

Mr. Winchester's songs include often-recorded gems "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," "Mississippi, You're On My Mind," "Isn't That So?" and "Biloxi." He received a lifetime achievement award from performance rights organization ASCAP in 2007, and Bob Dylan once said of Mr. Winchester, "You can't talk about the best songwriters and not include him."

In truth, Mr. Winchester's songs were atypical enough that he didn't need to worry about besting anyone. His works were, like their creator, both refined and whimsical, revealing hard truths with chuckling gentility.

"Nobody told me about this part," he sang in "A Showman's Life," a song about a struggling music-maker. "They told me all about the pretty girls, and the wine and the money and the good times."

On "North Star," from 1972's "Third Down, 110 To Go" album, Mr. Winchester opened his narrative by musing about heaven, then turned to earthly pondering:

"Does the world have a belly button?" he sang. "I can't get this out of my head/ 'Cause if it turns up in my yard, I'll tickle it so hard/ 'Til the whole world will laugh to wake the dead."

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