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Records: The Low Key, Genius of 'Third Down'

Third Down, 110 To Go
Jesse Winchester
Bearsville BR 2101

BY STEPHEN DAVIS

In the early spring of 1970, the American public was made aware that living in draft-imposed exile in Quebec was a young singer and poet named Jesse Winchester. He was born in Louisiana, lived most of his life in Memphis and emigrated to Canada in 1967 to avoid being part of the American genocide machine. The story goes that the Band's Robbie Robertson heard a couple of Jesse's tunes and went on to get the man a recording contract and produced his fine first album, the one on Ampex with such songs as "Yankee Lady" and Jesse's gaunt, slightly disturbing but handsome visage staring out at you from four sides of the double sleeve.

Jesse's second album, *Third Down, 110 To Go* comes to us more than two years after the first, and it seems as though the wait was worthwhile. Were I to let myself go I could ramble on for five or six pages about the low-keyed, gentle genius of the record, how I could feel justified in calling it the best single album of the year even though there are a couple of months left, how Jesse cuts almost every other singer/songwriter currently on the boards, about how, like the sluggard I am, I haven't been doing much these days except sitting around drinking wine with my friends and playing *Third Down* over and over for them.

What's going on here is the emergence into full bloom of perhaps the most important voice of our young decade, a poet with the image power of a Dylan or Mitchell, a singer with the strength and range we simply have not heard before from a contemporary, male musician. Each of the 13 selections of this record is a potent yet thoroughly laconic masterpiece, some inclusively cutting to the quick of tense situations – like romantic double-dealing, the tight jolt of the realization of the first fatherhood, the pulls and vagaries of life under the full moon. I'm borrowing the words of a friend when I say this, but Jesse's new album is the most spiritually refreshing to be heard in a long, long time. I haven't figured out what it is yet, but there's about 10 times more to it than meets the ear.

Literary music, musical literature; both are the same. Rarely to see a musician with as much control over language as melody. But Winchester's ballads, muted rockers, lullabies and simple melodic vehicles for pithy wisdom are as much to be read as heard. Over the hypnotic hand-clap percussion of the album's first tune, "Isn't That So?" he sings:

*Didn't He know what He was doing
Putting eyes into my head
If He didn't want me watching women
He'd a left my eyeballs dead
Isn't that so?
Isn't that so?*

And on the delightful "North Star" there are these lines: "Now does the World have a belly button? / I can't get this out of my head / If it turns up in my yard / I'll tickle it so hard / That the whole World will laugh to wake the dead."

Except for a couple of upbeat reminders of Jesse's rock & roll past, most of the tunes are muted, with unobtrusive instrumentation centering on acoustic or soft electric guitar, occasional piano and a timely squad of handclappers. Three of the tunes were produced by Todd Rundgren but none bears the Runt's usually identifiable stamp. As Jesse now lives in Montreal several of the musicians are French Canadian, and they supply a kind of subliminal funky patois that is indescribable but definitely *there*.

Other songs: "Do It," a lovely, uncomplicated, relaxed suggestion about taking chances with fate – "If we're treading on thin ice, then we might as well dance"; "Midnight Bus" and "God's Own Jukebox" are both pacing, exciting tunes, the latter the strongest on the LP, about the perfect, slightly drunken mood from which comes the happiest music: "Do La Lay" and "Lullaby For The First Born" both celebrate what must be the simultaneous joy and bewilderment at the first pangs of new fatherhood. It's funny, but these two tunes seem to be as much lullabies for Jesse as they are for his baby. The latter, "First Born," is gorgeous to the sublime, with Jesse's flute laying down the line of the song and wordless singing that sets Jesse apart from the ranks of modern crooners altogether: "The Easy Way" is a nice street hustler's ballad and "Glory To The Day" deals with the tremendous pleasure that the dawn gives to those who live at night. Finally, "All Of Your Stories" ends the album on an oddly enigmatic note, a poem to an old fellow Jesse knows, of whom he says, "If you've lit the occasional candle, you're allowed the occasional curse."

I won't go into the love songs because there's nothing to say about them that's not in the hearing. *Third Down, 110 To Go* – the futility implicit in the title is Jesse's way of telling us he's playing under Canadian rules, and it might be easier on him were he at home. That's just a projection but that's what it feels like to me. But it's ironic and somehow fitting that our best writers should do their best work in exile. It seems the psychic and karmic implications of that fact are what we deserve.

Aside from that down thought, this is such a beautiful record, and in listening to it and digesting it you'll be doing yourself a favor.

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