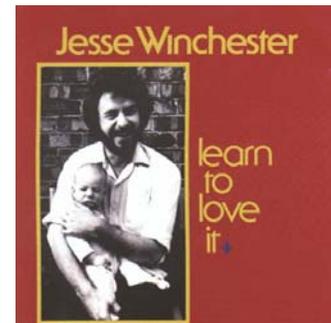


Records: Look Homeward Jesse

Learn To Love It
Jesse Winchester
Bearsville BR 6953



By Bud Scoppa

On Jesse Winchester's first two albums, *Jesse Winchester* and *Third Down, 110 To Go*, the fine balance struck between conviction and melodiousness, simplicity and eloquence made the music as enduring as any in rock.

In contrast, the new third album is apparently, as the title proclaims a pragmatically affirmative acceptance of Winchester's seven-year exile in Canada. Both this acceptance and the way Winchester expresses it limit the album in a dramatic sense: Agitation, restlessness and yearning are inherently more interesting dramatically than is coming to terms with one's condition; and Winchester has clothed his more positive statements – half ironically perhaps – in neogospel dress. Whether ironic or not, the gospel touches that color three of Winchester's own songs and a modified traditional tune (one of four nonoriginals) disrupt the musical flow and produce the first false note of Winchester's recording career.

Fortunately, cutting against the grain of the album's intent are several of the kinds of songs we've come to expect from the unique artist. Two of them, ironically were written by someone else – Russell Smith, whose songs enable Jesse to express the overt cynicism and discontent he presently won't allow himself in his own writing. Smith's "Third Rate Romance" ("... low rent rendezvous..."), which caustically tells the funny-sad story of a pointless liaison, is given a rousing arrangement and an effectively nasty lead vocal by an uncredited singer (Smith?), while the same writer's "The End Is Not In Sight" provides an workable resolution for the album's contradictions.

Four Winchester songs combine with the pair by Smith to form the undercurrent of romanticism and melancholy that raises this flawed album well out of the contented mediocrity its apparent viewpoint has dictated. "Every Word You Say" is a sincere and inventive love song that returns to the title phrase at the end of every verse. "Defying Gravity" has the sound and the lyric style of the second album's musings: Where on that record he was contemplating the world's navel, he's now toying with the idea of jumping off entirely.

But revealing Winchester's skills at their most passionate are two songs of longing about the land of his youth, "L'Air de la Louisiane" and "Mississippi, You're On My Mind." Winchester shares with the similarly gifted Jackson Browne the knack of composing seemingly timeless, primally American melodies; these songs contain two of the richest and loveliest he's written. Unlike Browne's, Winchester's melodies have the distinct flavor of his home region; indeed, there are moments – and these two are the most dramatic – when Jesse seems to be Stephen Foster reincarnated.

In the traditional Christianity of the words on Martha Carson's "You Can't Stand Up Alone," Jesse uncovers the depth of conviction he couldn't muster in his own songs of acceptance. At the same time, the idea of singing the hymn a cappella is an audacious one in regard to the cautionary message of its words. Winchester may be suggesting his pride has been as important as his beliefs to his survival during the years in exile.

Although weakened, musically and dramatically, by its several hollow moments, *Learn To Love It* is nevertheless an exceptional record. And even this hollowness finally functions to reveal the artist: a romantic and a cynic who can't completely curb either of those unsettling forces – which may well be eroding the ground on which he's trying to settle down. Russell Smith has provided the key phrase for Winchester's conflict: "My soul must have its rest / But the end is not in sight."

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