

Jesse Winchester: Still Third Down

BY JAMES LITKE — SEP 1974



MONTREAL – Inside an apartment in a quiet residential neighborhood just west of the bustling downtown area, two-year-old Jamie patrols a sparsely furnished living room atop his tricycle, a menacing gleam in his eye. From the relative safety of the couch, Jesse Winchester watches with amusement this placid family scene that is seven years and some 1200 miles removed from the Memphis that he fled to avoid induction into the Army. Upon hearing the familiar question, his brow stiffens noticeably. He answers politely, but there is a certain amount of weariness in his voice.

“I think it’s still part of my image. For sure. Every press release that I read has always got ... Tennessee boy... or ex-Tennessee boy... or draft-dodger, or something like that, so it’s definitely still in people’s heads. It’s just like having blue eyes. You’re not really free of it, but I just don’t give it much thought.”

On August 19th, while President Ford was laying down his proposal for a conditional, rather than the hoped-for “blanket,” type of amnesty, before an unusually subdued Veterans of Foreign Wars, gathering in Chicago, Jesse spent the day in quiet celebration, eating homegrown tomatoes under a warm Montreal sun. Were the facts of his day-to-day living going to be altered in some way?

“In a way, yes, and in a way, no. I think it would have been a grand gesture on the part of the American government to grant unconditional amnesty, but I think it’s still a very humiliating thing to see draft dodgers and deserters work for it. He (Ford) had to be political about it, thus the strings were attached. He described it as though we had made some kind of mistake and were going to have to pay for it by working in civil service for a few years. I don’t feel as though I made a mistake in the first place.

“I know a lot of people who are up here who are a lot worse off than I am. For them, it would be real nice. They miss South Philly or whatever. It sounds really good for them. They can’t speak French, or they can’t stand the cold weather. They want to go back home. My bridge is burned. I’m sort of committed to this life. If this proposal means that I can go back for a funeral or a wedding or to look around Memphis for a week, then it’s okay. But when we first came up here, we did it fully aware that we would never be allowed to go home. That was the deal.”

So Jesse Winchester works the clubs: literally every coffeehouse and café (a place where people don’t get too drunk”) in the vicinity of Montreal. And if he is financially solvent, he occasionally ventures west to play Toronto. Over the course of seven years of performing and two critically, if not commercially, successful albums (*Jesse Winchester, Third Down 110 To Go*), he has gathered a sizeable local following. Translated, that means he might find seven nights’ work during one week, only three the next and perhaps none the following week.

“It varies from a set routine, which is good. I’m glad of that. After I arrived in Montreal, the first few months I worked in a French band. All the other fellas were French and couldn’t speak any English, and that got me down. I mean it was good for me, I learned to speak French and all that, but I got depressed about not being able really to express myself.

“You know how life is.... Who’s satisfied? Before I made a record, it never occurred to me that I *could* make a record. I was always backing singers, playing electric guitar and I was very happy doing it. I still kind of miss it.”

Yet he enjoys playing by himself. On the one hand, it is quiet, and on the other there is nobody to hang you up. Appearing at the Golem Coffeehouse in Montreal, it was a reflective, almost melancholy Jesse Winchester who worked smoothly through a 90-minute set. Playing only an acoustic guitar, his repertoire that evening consisted of simple, very direct ballads, personal reminiscences and an occasional, though considerably softened, resurrection of pop tunes that someone else had driven into the ground along the path to commercial success.

When the audience left, many walked out with the impression that the man was sad – “I’ve had a lot of people tell me that I’m sad. You wouldn’t want to sing a song that you didn’t mean. Even if it is a sad song and only expresses one area of the emotional spectrum, if you’ve ever felt really bad, there’s nothing wrong with singing a down song, because it’s true. You don’t have to be down all the time.”

Another album, *Learn To Love It*, his third on the Bearsville label, was released last month. Another child, his second, is due sometime in November. He crossed the Canadian border with the understanding that he’d never look back. At long last, comfortably settled and working steadily in Montreal, he talks about the days ahead, but with a healthy respect for the passage of time.

“It’s always the same person looking out from behind your eyes. I’ve got a family now, I’m further along with my work and I can record when I want to. So I suppose I’m better off in a way, or at least I feel more settled. But it still seems like the same guy. I have the same weaknesses and strong points. Things don’t really change that much.”

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