

JESSE WINCHESTER (*Ampex A-10104*)

Many, many years ago, when I was very small, my parents were driving out in the countryside of Vermont with my sister and me and at one point we were looking for a shortcut from one town to another. A road led off to the left of the highway, and looked like it might be the right way to go, even though, far from being a shortcut, half-way in the thing turned from asphalt to dirt and involved a complex set of curves along the way. Since the idea was not to save time, but to get off the crowded highway, we turned left.

For about five minutes, we went through some perfectly prosaic farmlands, and then it happened. We turned the corner, and there was a ghost town, right in central Vermont. But what a ghost town it was! The former off-season home of a now defunct circus. All of the houses were red with white trim, and many of them were painted – illustrated might be a better word – with pictures of horse-drawn sulkies, jugglers, clowns, lions, and the whole circus thing all in the finest circus-poster style. Across the road was a field in which rotted a ferris wheel, bump-em and roller coaster cars, a few open cages on wheels, and various other circus paraphernalia.

It took me a while to get into Jesse Winchester's album, but when it hit me, I felt like I had just turned that back country corner again. I was expecting the kind of album you'd expect from a draft-resister who had been forced into exile in Canada – cynicism, rather clumsily political songs, and a bunch of clichéd over-used tunes. Then again, I was also expecting another of your typical singer-songwriter – there must be a million of them in the stores by now, with names like S. Davis Cohen, Steve Noonan, Shawn Phillips, Jim Williams. No doubt some of them are good, but I defy you to tell most of them apart, with the pseudo-Nashville arrangements and sensitive, shadows-of-my-mind lyrics.

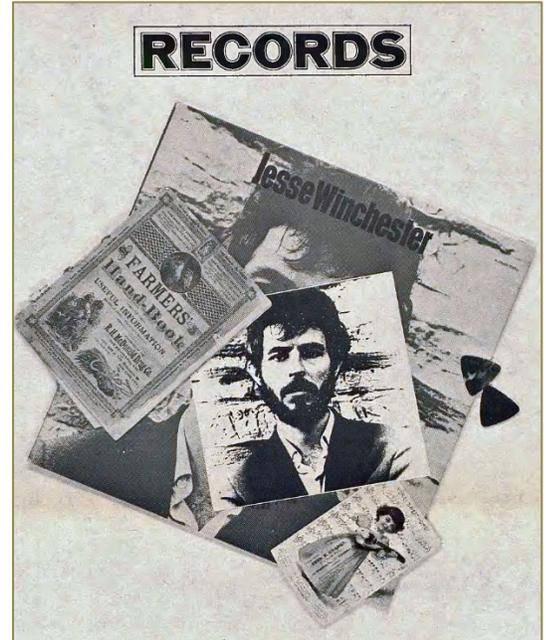
Not so. With this debut album, Jesse Winchester joins a growing list of artists in all areas who have discovered a thing I call "organic Americana." What precisely it is hard to define. The ghost town had it. Copland's *Third Symphony* has it, as do Robert Indiana's paintings and the *1886 Farmer's Handbook of Useful Information* ("This book is dedicated to Nature's truest Nobleman – the FARMERS.") And it is being resurrected in rock, it would seem, by the Band, by the Byrds' *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, and, in his own clumsy way, by Bob Dylan.

What has he done? Well, not all that much that could be considered revolutionary. He's just managed to write a bunch of songs that not only can be listened to, but can also be hummed, sung, remembered and, at times quoted: "She gave me apple cider, homemade bread/Play a tune for a Tennessee kid/Who's thinking of leaving another town/With no place to go if he did/Cause they'll catch you wherever you're hid." (That last, incidentally, is as close as he gets to outright political sentiment on the album, and, considering his past, and the genuineness with which he delivers the line, it's perfectly understandable.) But maybe in these days of overstated blandness that *is* revolutionary.

And let us not forget the music. This album was produced by none other than Robbie Robertson, and it is to his credit that it winds up feeling like, but not overly sounding like, the best of the Band's work. In fact, the whole album might be a footnote to "*King Harvest*," or perhaps vice-versa. Winchester has been fortunate enough to hook up with the superlative bunch of sidemen, none of whom (with the exceptions of Robbie Robertson and Levon Helm) I have ever heard before. Drummers Dave Lewis and Guy Black use the same economy of statement and loose-jointedness as Levon Helm, and bassist Bob Boucher's work is excellent throughout. Winchester also plays fine piano and guitar, and his work on "Biloxi" is beautifully moody, complementing the lyrics superbly.

The songs themselves have many facets. Jesse Winchester is one of the few songwriters today who can write convincingly Fifties lyrics. In fact, he is the first person in I-don't-know-how-many years to write a name-of-the-dance song: "The Nudge." If you don't know how to do it, don't mess with it. He rocks out with feeling on "Payday" and "That's a Touch I Like."

"Yankee Lady" is the unquestioned masterpiece of the album, a song that may well define organic Americana for a while. With Levon Helm supplying wide open spaces (fifths, fourths, tenths) on the mandolin, and an absolutely believable personal experience providing the lyrics, I dare someone to listen to it and fail to be moved. "Biloxi" is one of those cheap colored prints hanging in a farmer's parlor, showing the girls and boys wading in the bay while the sun is



either coming up or going down from off towards New Orleans. It is merely an observation, but an observation that is lifted from the prosaic by the striking melody, and beautifully uncomplicated piano accompaniment. "Black Dog" is terrifying brooding, with the massive animal rising from slumber and going into his daily routine ("Think of where the *black dog's* been") slapped forward by Levon Helm's drum line, which crescendos into an intensity quite unlike anything else on the album.

I'll admit it – this album has me hooked. I discovered it during the whole Kent State/Cambodia mess, when it was the only record that could pull me out of my depression and I've listened to it a hundred times since. It is the only rock and roll album I can put on after listening to Charles Ives's Holiday Symphony, and it is the first record I can remember making me wish I had a fireplace. It is the record to buy if you can really rationalize shelling out six bucks for *Self Portrait*, and it is, possibly, the album that will give you a clue why some people don't think the Dylan album is all that bad. I really think every patriotic American should listen to Jesse Winchester, the man who loved it and left it, because his songs transcend all barriers with the exception of one: art.

ED WARD

