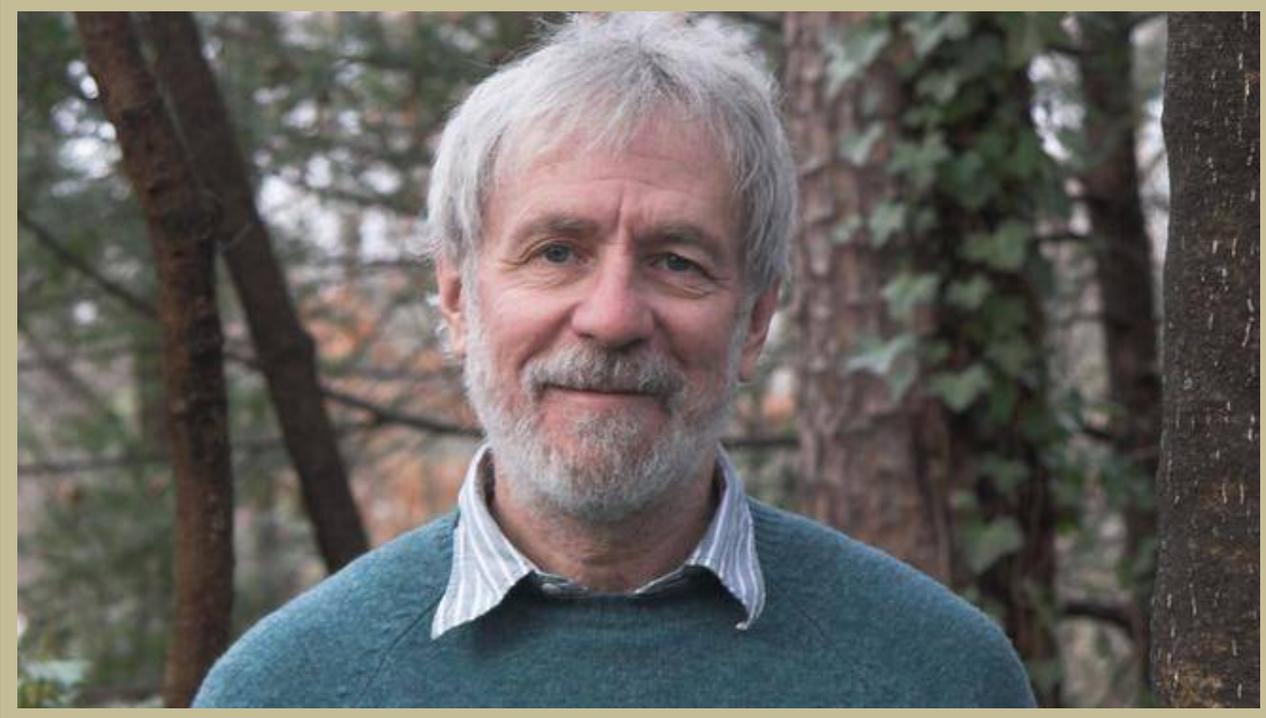


Winchester making stop in Valley

By *STEPHEN COOKE ARTS REPORTER*

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Singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester headlines Wolfville's Deep Roots Music Festival this weekend. Cynthia Winchester

When Jesse Winchester says he misses Canada, he means it.

This week, the veteran singer-songwriter, and son of the South, heads back north to the country he called home for over three decades to perform Thursday at Annapolis Royal's King's Theatre and Saturday at the Deep Roots Music Festival in Wolfville.

The Memphis-raised musician settled down in Quebec during the Vietnam War era of the 1960s, unable to return to his native land until the late '70s, and released a series of acclaimed albums full of wry and unsentimental tunes crafted with the help of folks like Robbie Robertson, Todd Rundgren and Willie Mitchell.

In 2002, Winchester heeded the call of his heart and his homeland and resettled in Charlottesville, Va., but with two adult children still living in Canada, and a devoted following built up from years of living and touring here, he can't stay away for long.

"I go up a lot, and it feels great, I just love it," he says. "It's wrenching in a way, when it comes to this time of year and the leaves start to turn and fall. I used to live in the Eastern Townships and — you can choose to believe me or not — but around this time I'd think, 'Gee, some snowfall would be nice. I could make a cup of tea and sit by the window and watch it come down.'

"But by the middle of March, my tune would change to 'Lord, when is this ever gonna be over?' But that's the truth, I do feel that way about this time of year."

That should be no surprise to longtime listeners, considering how eloquently — "or at least, sincerely," he chuckles — he wrote about adjusting to the climate in songs like *Snow and Wintery Feeling*, the latter covered by Anne Murray on her 1979 album *I'll Always Love You*.

There won't be any white stuff on the ground when Winchester arrives in the Annapolis Valley, but he hopes he'll have a chance to catch a glimpse of the work of one of his favourite painters, and one of Wolfville's best-known residents, Alex Colville, who died two months ago at 92.

"I'm really not an art fan, but I know what I like, and if there's anybody that I would collect, it would be him," Winchester says of the world-renowned artist. "I just loved his stuff, it was so clean and so full of meaning, and thought-provoking. He was just a brilliant, brilliant man."

You can see why there'd be an attraction, considering the precise wordplay and uncluttered arrangements of most of Winchester's recordings. And there's more in the works, as he's just finished recording tracks for a new album in a studio outside Austin, Texas, with Jimmy Buffett cohort Mac McAnally, with plans to finish them in Muscle Shoals, Ala., in November.

The record will be a marked contrast to the unabashed romanticism of his last CD, 2009's *Love Filling Station*, with this new release coming after Winchester's bout with esophageal cancer in 2011.

"Well, to be honest with you, most of the songs were written while I was deathly ill," he sighs. "I wasn't aware of this until I started putting them together to get ready to record, but the mood is kind of blue. There's not a lot I can do about that."

"I certainly came by that feeling honestly, a lot of the songs are kind of sad, so there it is." But music became part of the recovery, and after months of treatment, he was able to get back on the stage without much degradation to his clear and expressive voice, if YouTube videos are anything to go by.

"Of course there were times where you're just physically unable to do it, but you turn to the things that are going to absorb you," says Winchester, who found himself relying on Laurel & Hardy and the Marx Brothers when music didn't quite do the trick.

"There are all kinds of silver linings to experiences like that, and that's what you turn to."

"I don't think the human mind or psyche is really able to take too much dismay and horror and fear and anguish. Some sort of protection mechanism kicks in and you learn to deny and avoid thinking about unpleasant things. You just kind of shut it out and you do it almost automatically. I guess that's a good thing. I know that's a good thing, and that's exactly what I did."

While Winchester recuperated, or was "fixin' to die" as he wryly puts it, his friends and admirers filled in the downtime with a tribute album titled *Quiet About It*, named after a faithful yet fatalistic song on his self-titled debut.

The record is an all-star marvel, with contributions from James Taylor, Lyle Lovett, Lucinda Williams and Rodney Crowell, with vocals from Emmylou Harris and Vince Gill. As if his own discography didn't do the trick, *Quiet About It* secures Winchester's status as a songwriter's songwriter.

"It's one of those things where it's just too big to thank people," he says humbly. "You know you don't deserve it, and you'll never be able to pay them back, and anything you say is going to sound weak. I just kind of seize up when I think about it."

"It's on Jimmy Buffett's record label, he had a lot to do with it, and Elvis Costello did, too. But Jimmy's been mentoring me since I can't remember when, and I don't know why, but I've been very, very grateful."

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