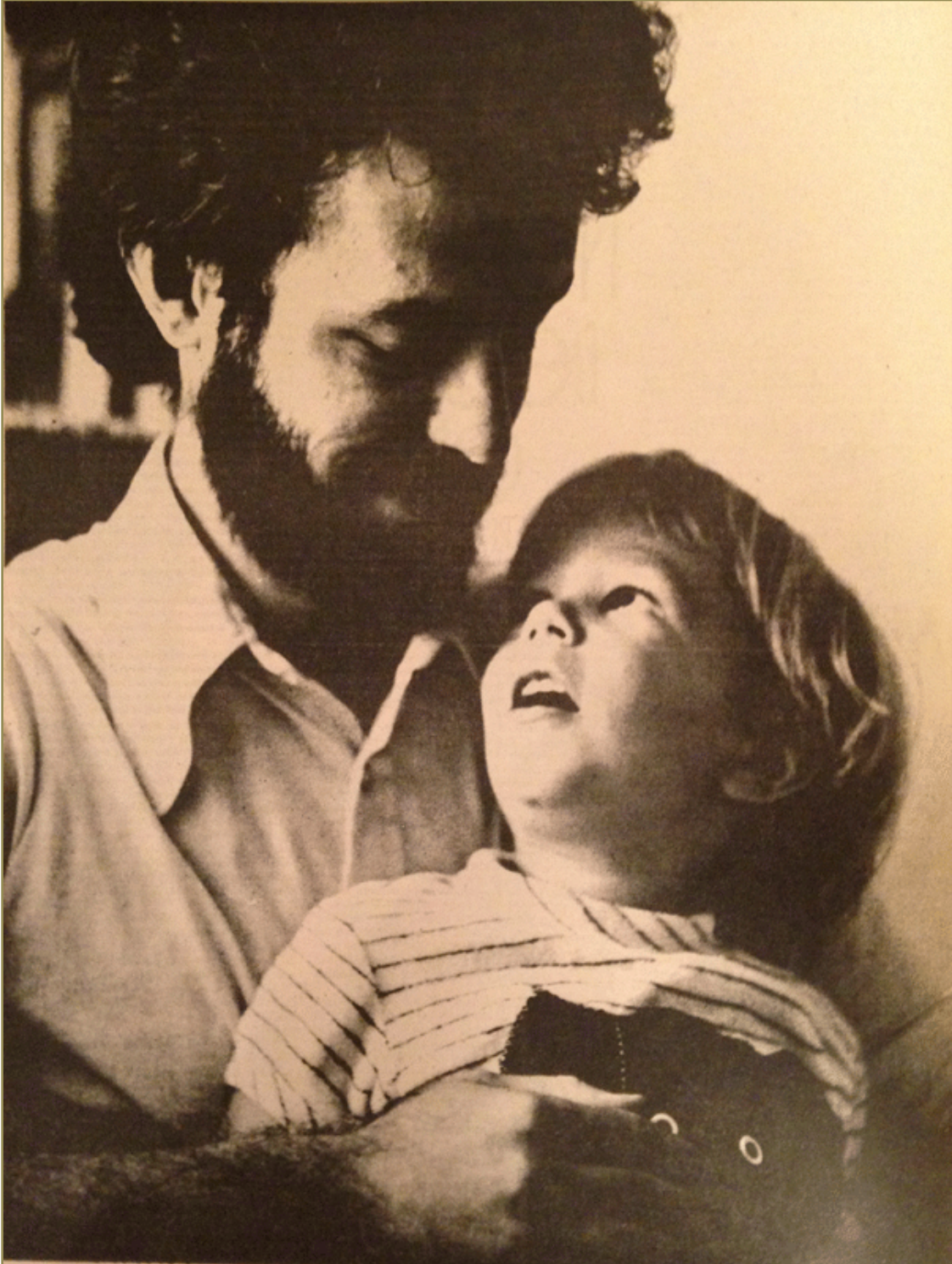


# Montreal Means Never Having To Say You're Sorry

AMNESTY FOR  
JESSE WINCHESTER?

By ANDY DOHERTY



*Winchesters. Jesse and two-and-a-half year old James. --- "I owe so much to Canada..."  
Jesse admits " ...I'll be there till the day I die."*

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Chuck Baker is one harried Canadian. "See that telephone over there?" He points across the cluttered office of the Yellow Door Coffeehouse. "It hasn't stopped ringing since Ford came out for amnesty. Every wire service on the continent wants to talk to me!"

Baker doesn't need the aggravation. Two full-time jobs is enough for any one man. By day Baker owns and operates a guitar shop, by night he runs the Yellow Door on the fringe of McGill University. That's a lot of work – now especially since Montreal city fathers threaten to close the Yellow Door if ceilings aren't raised beyond their current head-banging five foot, six inches. Every night Baker is down there digging up the floor. Hard damn work. And every night there's that god damned telephone ringing with some stateside reporter who wants a few draft dodger angles on Gerry Ford's amnesty bombshell. Damn telephone. Damn reporters. The draft dodgers aren't here anymore! They've scattered!

The Yellow Door was headquarters for the Montreal Council to Aid War Resisters. Once upon a time – it seems a long time ago – lots of people needed to get in touch with the Council. At the peak of the Vietnam War the Montreal Council to Aid War Resisters and the American Refugee Service processed and facilitated the arrival of hundreds of new American exiles every week. Between fifty and seventy-five thousand draft age American males sought a Canadian sanctuary rather than submit to an Army stint in Vietnam. Three cities bore the brunt of the arrivals: Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. Nobody knows exactly how many passed through the Yellow Door, but pass through they did, getting their bearings on a new country with the help of the Council.

But that was long ago. Nowadays folk music is the Yellow Door's preoccupation. Chuck Baker is digging up the floor so the ceilings will be seven-feet high. It's either that or close.

Jesse Winchester lives with his wife and kid on a quiet Montreal tree-lined street that would do any Chamber of Commerce proud. The houses are stone and brick, all uniformly removed fifteen feet from the roadway. On Sundays, the neighbors come out to manicure lawns, trim hedges, weed flowers, and wash cars in the driveways. Most everyone owns the house he lives in.

Not Jesse. Winchester pays two hundred dollars a month for the bottom floor of a two-family house with the large backyard. His rent is cheap because the house is on the corner where big trucks rumble by regularly – making's use of a popular shortcut. It's the modest home of a modest man who was born to middle-class parents in Memphis, Tennessee, thirty years ago. Jesse traces his ancestry directly to the founding fathers of the city. He was raised on the Bible as a Catholic for twelve years and given music lessons at an early age – like thousands of other Memphian youths. James Winchester fought in the South Pacific during World War II as a navigator and bombardier. Writer, Roger Neville Williams has Jesse on record describing his father after the war as, "tremendously fucked up, a shell-shock type of thing. He eventually came out of it, but my mother told us about it all the time..." The elder Winchester died of a heart attack when Jesse was nineteen.

By then Jesse was away at Williams College in Northwestern Massachusetts on a music scholarship. His experiences there were not atypical of other alienated collegiates of the sixties.

"I was from the south, y'know, and when I got up North Bob Dylan was just beginning to happen. Frankly, I couldn't see what all the excitement was about cause I was listening to Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters and Smokey Robinson and Ted Taylor and Albert Taylor. People like that and of course the country artists, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins, people like that. George Jones. Those to me are the people who can really sing. It seemed to me that the people in the North that were going crazy for Bob Dylan – it was kind of a... The Northerners always thought I was stupid because I have a Southern accent y'know and I

resented that. I didn't like the whole scene, the whole beatnik scene that was going down. I didn't feel like I was part of it because it wasn't happening in the South y'know. But I did come to like Dylan after a while when he started playing rock 'n roll."

Winchester switched his major from music to German and ended up in Munich for his junior year. His experiences abroad convinced him that he could survive in a foreign culture, so a year later when Uncle Sam called, Jesse packed a bag and a guitar and without giving much thought to what he was doing grabbed a plane to Montreal.

It was 1967.

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The French-Canadian capital doesn't look or feel like any American city. It's too clean, too old, too European... And too cold.

Daily, Montreal is attended by street sweepers who pedal on bicycle and barrel contraptions to pick paper from the street. The subways seem to receive a scrubbing every night.

The imminent arrival of the Olympics has spurred a building boom in the city. Construction sites are as common as automobiles along certain sections of Sherbrooke Street. High-rises are going up everywhere and a good number of older buildings have been razed, but the face of Montreal is still replete with turn-of-the-century architecture.

Most striking of all differences, however, are the language and the weather. The first night Jesse Winchester flew in to town "it was thirty degrees below zero. I checked into a hotel the first day I got here and that night I walk down Saint Catherine Street, not knowing it was Saint Catherine Street. I just wandered around town and heard people speaking French. I knew it was a French city, but I didn't really know. I just couldn't believe people were speaking French in North America. That was kind of... thrilling, really."

Jesse Winchester arrived in Canada before the heaviest onslaught of American exiles. In 1967, the Montreal Council to Aid War Resisters (primarily an organization of Americans) was not yet drawing the active financial support that it would shortly receive from a variety of churches. Then, all the Council could offer Jesse was advice: how to survive, where to look for work and housing, how to receive landed immigrant status and thus begin the five-year walk to Canadian citizenship. Jesse made it on his own.

Finding work was the big problem that the exile immediately faced. Jesse Winchester had it better than most. "I was very lucky, period. The middle-class people that came up here had an obvious advantage over the working-class people in getting work and just being able to function in a new environment. I had a real advantage. I had a bachelor's degree, which was a ticket into the country. It could get me points with the immigration people, things like that. I could've taught. I could speak a little French because of my education. I could speak German and so forth. And all these things gave me an advantage for sure – to say nothing of music, which is a trade you can apply anywhere in the world. And I was very fortunate. No question about it."

At the end of this first month in Canada, Jesse landed a job with a French-speaking band, Les Astronauts. He played rhythm guitar, and, as the only English-speaking member of the aggregation, sang lead on songs like "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" and "I'm A Man." They played a remarkable circuit north of Quebec City.

"We were up on the north side of the St. Lawrence where the road ends. I had never experienced that before. We were driving down the road. It was gravel all the way, very rough. There were no bookstores and no restaurants and no nothing. I did get really

depressed just for someone to talk to. That was hard, yeah, but like I said, I learned French and it was one of the steadiest jobs in music I've ever had. I got hundred dollars a week rain or shine. In the music business that's rare."

A year later that hundred dollars a week look like a huge sum indeed. By then Winchester had quit Les Astronauts and was making the rounds of coffeehouses with the songs he had recently begun to write. He didn't get rich quick.

"It was very hard for a while. I remember living on Mt. Royal Avenue for a while eating popcorn and peanut butter and tea. That was really a drag. I was living in a room about as big as this and there was a guy in the cubicle next to mine who was starting to go crazy. Sometimes in the middle of the night he'd wake up and start throwing things against the wall, screaming how life is not worth living at all, he's going to kill himself. Everybody else in the building would just lie awake and listen to him until finally this chick upstairs – she was the only one with nerve enough to scream at him. She'd scream at him and tell him to shut up and it would work. And that was it, he would go back to sleep. It was hard, yeah, I don't think I really minded it that much. When you're by yourself your nutrition doesn't really matter to you that much I don't think as long as you're full. If you're full of popcorn or if you're full of porterhouse it doesn't really matter."

Other things did matter. Winchester's arrival in Montreal coincided with the arrival of LSD and the far-out way of life. "I came up, I was a musician and in a bar band. No real responsibilities other than that. Then, that summer, the psychedelic epidemic hit town. It hit the whole continent, you know. I was caught up in it. It made me question everything. Whether it was proper and moral to sell music, to sell your talents. Whether you shouldn't just go into the woods. You know that whole organic number. I went through that. Finally after lying around and humming OM to myself for I don't know how long it was, the girl that I was staying with said 'Enough's enough. Get out and do what you do best. You have a talent. It's proper that you develop it. There's nothing wrong with being a professional. There's a difference between being a professional and being greedy. You're not greedy; you're not going to have any problem with that. So go get a job and get out of my house.'"

Piled on top of that was the Revolution. Draft dodgers were expected to be virulent Anti-Americans both by their fellows and their detractors. "People expected me to be a communist. To this day a lot of Canadians are worried the draft dodgers are all revolutionaries. And some of them are, I must admit, but very few that I meet. Most of them are people who just want to be left alone to live a normal life. That's all. The ones that I know don't want to cause any trouble. Far from it, a lot of people wanted me to appear at rallies and encourage people to revolt or whatever, I don't know. But they were very disappointed in me, believe me. I've always been turned off by political rhetoric and this kind of stuff. I'm a middle-of-the-road person politically. I'm easily as much a conservative as I am a liberal. I think welfare saps people's initiative and all those William F. Buckley clichés. I believe them, just as I believe that people who need welfare should get it and all the other liberal clichés."

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The Yellow Door is open tonight, renovations or no renovations. Chuck Baker means to keep the ship sailing. So what if the floor is down to the dirt and late arrivals will have to crouch cold-assed on it? Baker has a saying that goes, "If I can't walk into a club in my dirty jeans and fart, then I don't like the club."

On weekends the Yellow Door crams a hundred and fifty people into the minuscule cellar room. Tonight will be no exception. Louis and Sally Killen are playing, facing a club that resembles nothing so much as a half demolished building. A sink hangs on the wall in the middle of nowhere. Two doors are tied together and laid lengthwise on edge across the center of the room for no apparent reason. The tops of the pipes are thick with dust. But

the show goes on, as go on it must.

Jesse Winchester has been playing the Yellow Door off and on for five years. It isn't much, it isn't the big time, but then Montreal doesn't offer much of a big-time to an American folk/songwriter. There are only so many places to play in the city before a performer must repeat himself. And no question about it, without the gigs the states might offer, Jesse Winchester is repeating himself. Not for much bucks either. The Yellow Door's capacity falls short of two hundred.

But Jesse isn't discouraged by the places he's been playing. "I've watched a lot of musician's careers and it's just a matter of hanging in there, I think. I watched people like Jerry Lee Lewis who spent so many years playing in honky-tonks, and he's still up there doing it, y'know. Charlie Rich, who went through an awful lot of years of being nobody after a couple of successes. Now he's a king of the hill. You can go on and on and name a lot of people who just persevered because, I guess, they just didn't know anything else to do. And not even on the level like that, I know a lot of people around this town who are still playing in hotel lounges and honky-tonks and taverns and they're going to be doing it till they can't do it anymore. So I figure I'll do the same thing."

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David Beauchene, an exile who was heavily involved with both the Montreal Council to aide resisters and the American refugee Service, remembers a week when two thousand draft dodgers and deserters passed through his office. Of that number, he estimates that perhaps forty per cent have returned to America. The others? Quite simply, Beauchene states, "They've become Canadians"

Jesse Winchester, settled in Montreal, is a Canadian citizen now. He drives a green Volvo station-wagon, raises a family, and toys in his darkroom downstairs. He isn't rich, but he isn't sorry. And he isn't the same anymore. Montreal does things to a man.

"I think musically the change for me has been a change to music necessarily less funky and bluesy, because I am among people who are not funky and bluesy like they are in Memphis. Music is more rational, more white, whiter. I've stopped trying to sound Negro, which I did for a long time when I was younger. I still like a fat, thick sound like they have in the South rather than a crisp, brilliant sound which people seem to prefer up North. I like a more subtle sound quality, tone quality. I don't think I'll ever change that.

"It was only after I came up here that I began to appreciate or accept the fact that I was white. In the south I felt so terrible about the racial situation. I wanted so much to get along with colored people that it just drove me crazy. I wanted to be colored; I didn't want to be white. I think a lot of people my age felt the same way. It wasn't until I came up here that I said, let's face it, man, you're not colored and that's all there is to it."

When he looks back at the land he left behind, Jesse speaks without tears or bitterness. "Because it's only something that I can talk about and something that doesn't really affect me, it just becomes words really if you ask me how I feel about America...it breaks my heart to see what's happening now in the United States. But I suppose it's just divine justice. If one race enslaves another the scales of justice have got to swing. I hope America survives.

"But, as I say, my commitment and direction is to Canada. It's my duty to make sure that this country doesn't make the same mistakes. I think Canada is the greatest country in the world. Our moral fiber is still around and we still care about doing a good job for a day's pay and not elbowing our neighbor off the sidewalk. We're still a decent people up here, I think. And I'm very proud of that fact. And I hope we all work to keep it that way."

As far as the amnesty issue is concerned, Winchester wastes no venom on Gerry Ford. "I certainly appreciate the position that Ford's in politically. He can't offer unconditional amnesty. But he must understand that we – or at least I, can't accept anything else. I think he is a very courageous man apparently. But it's impossible. How can he do that? Fifty thousand boys have been killed, and you just don't – and all the others who are maimed or addicted or God knows what. Whether or not it's true, it really doesn't matter. What Ford has to think about is all of the country. It would be impossible for him. My own cousin was shot down over Vietnam. I know that my aunt and uncle wouldn't take 'Oooops! We're sorry!' It's just not possible for Ford to do that."

Jesse's solution? "The best that the United States is going to be able to manage is just to look forward and forget it all. Just let it slide. There's nothing else they can really do.

"I don't object to them making someone serve two years or however long it is in some sort of hospital or whatever. That's fine. For a country to ask two-year service of its citizens, that's traditional. Lots of countries have done that. Greece, probably before then. The thing that I couldn't do is admit that I was wrong.

"Now, if they don't ask me to admit I was wrong, then I won't ask them to admit they're wrong. If we could both just agree to say something like that, that would be fine. But they want me to confess guilt and of course, me, from my point of view, if anybody should be apologizing, they should be apologizing to me. If I'm willing to forgo that, I think they should be, too. But they're not."

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