

*"But I left Tennessee in a hurry, dear/In same way that I'm leaving you/Because love is mainly just memories/And everyone's got him a few"*

– Jesse Winchester, *"The Brand New Tennessee Waltz"*

You can hear a pin drop.

I bet you heard that phrase before. Usually it refers to the quietness of a room. But let's say it isn't a room but something larger, like a park. And not just any park, but Golden Gate Park. Now that would be something!

Sitting in the middle of Golden Gate Park during the annual Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival one gloomy October afternoon, several hundred folk-music lovers, myself included, were waiting for a songwriters circle to take hold. I've always enjoyed a good old-fashioned songwriters circle, also known as a round robin or a guitar pull. The format, which was probably originated in someone's living room or back porch, is simple: a handful of songwriters pass a lone guitar around, each presenting his or her homegrown creations. For me, it's the best way to really hear a song.

The lineup to this particular round robin was impressive, and we were all prepared to hear the fine craftsmanship of Guy Clark, the political rant of Steve Earle and the country stomp of David Olney. But it was the fourth participant, Jesse Winchester, who really got to us.

The crowd was romping, stomping and singing along throughout the first three performers' sets, having a good ol' time. But when the spotlight was on Winchester, not a single audience member made a noise. Even the birds in the trees shut their traps. All of us sat there and listened quietly, intently, to this one artist, with his delicate guitar picking and his fragile voice, playing songs about lost memories and crushed dreams.

I swear, you can hear a pin drop in that park.

And if you didn't have a lump in your throat, you probably had your mouth wide open in wonderment.

And all the while I was thinking, who is this guy and why haven't I heard of him before? I found out the answer months later.

Winchester was an all-American boy, fresh out of high school, growing up in Mississippi during the mid-1960s. He was spending his summer days playing guitar in several rock bands, until one day, he received his draft notice. Not willing to fight and die in Vietnam, he did what any normal human being would do: he skipped town and crossed the Canadian border.

Alone in Quebec, he began writing heartbreaking ballads about his childhood in the South, which caught the ear of Robbie Robertson. Robertson produced the young man's debut album, and Winchester began promoting his music throughout Canada. Yet he couldn't tour in his own homeland without the risk of doing jail-time. He had to wait until 1977 – the year President Carter pardoned all draft resisters – when he could step foot in the United States again. He finally moved back for good in 2002 and a year later he appeared on that stage in Golden Gate Park where I first saw him.

This summer Winchester is making the rounds promoting his latest set of songs. I'm going to catch him at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica this September. I cannot wait to hear his voice, his guitar, and the sound of that pin dropping.