



**MARK LEPAGE**  
GAZETTE ROCK MUSIC CRITIC

A yellow dog and a tiger-striped cat loll in front of the woodstove, in a corner of the book-lined walls of the log house. Jesse Winchester is up on the landing, picking out Rhythm of the Rain on the piano with an aching deliberateness as melted snow drips outside the window. Yup, it's rough.

So the first question, conjured during the drive out to Magog, is kindling in the woodstove before it's even been asked:

Why would anyone want to live way out here in the middle of nowhere?

Lots to give up in the big city, all right. Lots of empty stores with blind windows to stare back at you all along Ste. Catherine St. Lots of reminders of a life that doesn't interest you any more.

But then Jesse Winchester would find it easier than most to leave the city. The soft Shreveport accent is uneroded by 2½ decades in Quebec, but then Winchester isn't a Quebecer like

## Life on the

## private side

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most. Winchester had a choice.

"They'll catch you wherever you're hid," he wrote 25 years ago in *The Brand New Tennessee Waltz*. It's taken some time, but we caught him. Sort of.

He's pretty slippery, though. They couldn't nab him at the border 28 years ago when he left his history-steeped Virginia family and Uncle Sam's Vietnam invite behind to become the toast of the '70s Quebec music scene.

They couldn't freeze him in the floodlights when stardom beckoned and Winchester shrugged "no thanks." Now 50 and farther from the limelight than ever, he figures he hasn't played live since the late '80s and will not again.

But still the outside world reaches out a tentative hand. Winchester lives in semi-seclusion, writing songs privately for very public artists but confining his performances to kitchen-table jams with his wife on the Everly Brothers, Sam and Dave, and Tammy Terrell and Marvin Gaye.

In the meantime, some treasonous weasel at a record company conspired to dust him off and put him back in the racks. The CD rerelease of Winchester's first two albums - *Jesse Winchester*, originally released in 1970, followed in 1972 by *Third Down, 110 to Go* - isn't going to have them hiring extra security at Sam the Record Man.

The kids who make up the bulk of the marketplace now have never heard of him, wouldn't recognize him as the songwriter covered by Reba McEntire, Wynona Judd and the Mavericks and making a good living at collecting royalties. He won't be on MuchMusic any time

soon. The rerelease is a ripple in time, an invitation, and Winchester declines. Like the last time.

*"When I feel that way, I just wanna shout  
But trust me, Lord, to be quiet about it."*

- Quiet About It, from *Jesse Winchester*

The liner notes to the new edition of that debut album read "on some level, if you want to be a star, talent is immaterial. You have to want it badly."

He didn't, not even with a name that reads like a rock'n'roll cowboy's. "Fame seems to be jive on the surface. You don't even need to bother investigating it."

Winchester remembers touring not as a champagne-soaked romp through perpetual adolescence, not as the blood, sweat, tears and communion of the performer-audience experience.

He remembers it like snowy days at school. There were incidents when the power would go out at a gig or public transit would go on strike, and the show would have to be cancelled.

"Everybody else in the show would say, 'Oh no, too bad.'"

"And I would say, 'Yesssss. I can make it home in time for Cheers.'"

So he was no trouper then and ain't now. He writes, has an agent who shops his stuff around Nashville, where there are many takers, and Jesse strolls out to the mailbox.

The record business is a very large gun aimed at the heads of most artists, but in this case "it's aimed at my head, but from a long, long distance."

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# WINCHESTER *Never regretted his decision to leave*

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His manner is whisper-soft as he says this, but his occasional laughter fills a room. It's the first of several contradictions, beginning with being a private man in a very public business.

At least four of the songs on the debut — Tennessee Waltz, Yankee Lady, Black Dog and the sublimely melancholy Biloxi — are classics, not just in the singer/songwriter genre, but in song. So he's a sensitive artist who rejects fame, but at the same time matter-of-factly admits "if anything tempts me, it's riches."

He wouldn't compromise with the fame machine to get them, and doesn't believe you have to. "Maybe to make big bucks, like Madonna, but that sort of riches doesn't tempt me. I'll settle for ... less."

Politically he is "in some things, conservative, and others, what's called liberal. Tolerance, those sorts of things I would like to think I'm liberal. But financially ..."

And musically, He listens to country and R&B, hates rap, and had no idea who that dirty-haired blond guy was when he made the papers for blowing his head off last April. It would be easy to say time has passed JW by in his log house. But it's really the other way around.

A framed letter on the wall dated June 28, 1873, from the dean of Washington College in Lexington, Va., to a Mrs. Mary Winchester, commends her son James R. for "distinguished industry in his studies." That, and the Shelby Foote books on the shelves, might be Civil War knickknacks belonging to any history buff.

When you are a fifth cousin of Robert E. Lee, when your father served in World War II but turned his back on soldiering for the peaceable life of a gentleman farmer — and when you are a Louisiana-born singer who turned down Vietnam for a new life in Montreal, history won't stay on the shelf. Your family album takes on the drama of a period movie. The thread of mili-

tarism running through his family has thinned in its passage through the generations. Winchester has never regretted his decision to leave.

"It's strange, but I respect the people who went to Vietnam. It was just the way you saw it. If you believed in the reasons for it, it was your duty to go. If you didn't, then I don't see how you *could* go. If you're gonna pick up a gun and shoot somebody, you better believe."

Members of his family were less sure of his decision.

"Some of them died before they got over it. My grandfather. Others have come to terms with it. They're nice to me now. My father died before the whole thing happened. My mother and I still speculate on what his reaction might have been."

Perhaps the man who turned his back on his own war would understand his son turning in to tend his private garden.

It's certain Winchester Sr. would have no more luck catching his son than the draft board, the record industry, or the fans did. So as you leave the house in Magog, middle of nowhere, you keep the image of him heading back into the log house, like Sad-Eyed Jesse of the Lowlands, like the guy who called the tune to his own Brand New Waltz, and you let him stay hid.

■ *Jesse Winchester will be performing absolutely nowhere in the foreseeable future.*

*The Stony Plain label will rerelease two more of his albums — Learn To Love It and Let The Rough Side Drag — by the end of March, with three others due later.*

*You can hear songs from the already-rereleased Winchester albums by calling The Gazette's Info-Line on your Touch-tone phone. After calling Info-Line at 841-8600, follow the simple instructions you'll be given and dial the following four-digit codes: Biloxi from the CD Jesse Winchester (code 8001); Quiet About It from Jesse Winchester (code 8002) and Isn't That So from Third Down, 110 to Go (code 8003).*



Winchester plugged in: the singer in a 1970 Montreal Star photo.