

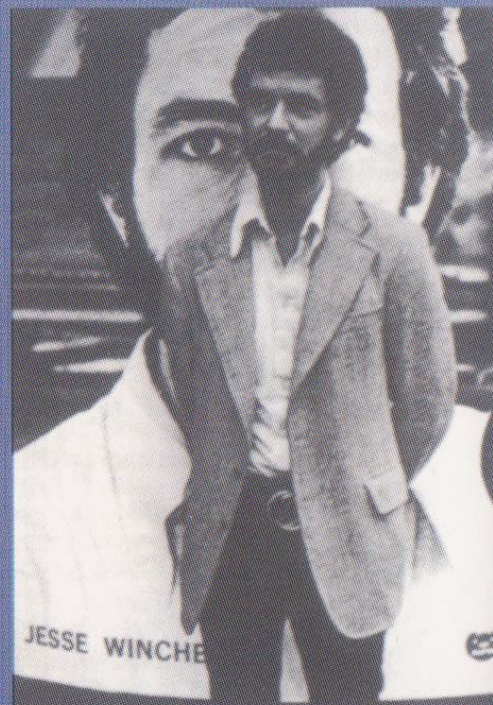
On some level, if you want to be a star, talent is immaterial. You have to want it badly. Very, very badly. That's where Jesse Winchester fell short. He has a pained reluctance to thrust himself into the spotlight and scream 'Look at me!' Ironically, his songs are precise and commercial, the last qualities you'd expect from someone so introspective.

Jesse James Winchester was born in Bossier City, Louisiana, on May 17, 1944, and grew up in Mississippi and Memphis. He studied philosophy in Massachusetts and Munich, and was back in Memphis playing cocktail piano when he got his draft notice. He knew his decision to evade the draft would upset his family, but he saw no other option. "I looked in the encyclopaedia under Canada," he said. "That's how ignorant Americans are, or how ignorant this American was. It said Montreal was the second largest French-speaking city in the world. I had been in Europe for a while, and I liked living with a different language, so that appealed to me. That's how clumsy my reasoning was."

Soon after Jesse arrived, he began writing songs. 'Brand New Tennessee Waltz' was the first. "The song itself, even to me, is kinda cryptic," he says. "I know who it's about, and the rest of the details, but it's an obvious first song. The story's not clear. It was stream of consciousness writing, which was in fashion in those days." A U.S. Army deserter, Chuck Gray, had a home studio in Ottawa, and Jesse went there in 1969 to work on some demo tapes. A friend of his girlfriend got them to Robbie Robertson, who offered to produce the first album. It was cut in the late months of 1969 with a group that included Canadian aces David Rea and Bob Boucher, old time western fiddler Al Cherny, and Robertson and Levon Helm from The Band. Bob Cato's jacket design was rendered in earthtones, much like his design for The Band's second LP. The photo had the grainy, haunted look of Matthew Brady's Civil War photos.

The problems started once the record hit the streets in March 1970. Robbie Robertson had placed Jesse with his manager, Albert Grossman, who struck a deal between his company, Bearsville Records, and Ampex Tape's new record division. Ampex soon found the record business to be more brutal than they had imagined, and folded the label just as Jesse's album was breaking. Two years passed before Grossman relaunched the label with Warner Bros.

Jesse's second album, *Third Down, 110 To Go*, was titled after a Canadian Football League scoreline that denotes a pretty hopeless situation. Before it appeared, Jesse had cut an aborted album with Todd Rundgren and Full Tilt Boogie. Three Rundgren-produced songs, including 'Midnight Bus' and 'Silly Heart,' made it into the final album; the rest was produced by Jesse himself. The album's pastoral feel was a direct and negative response to

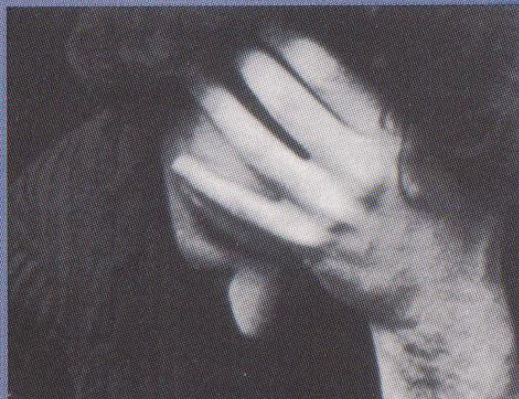


Jesse Winchester



learn
to
love
it.

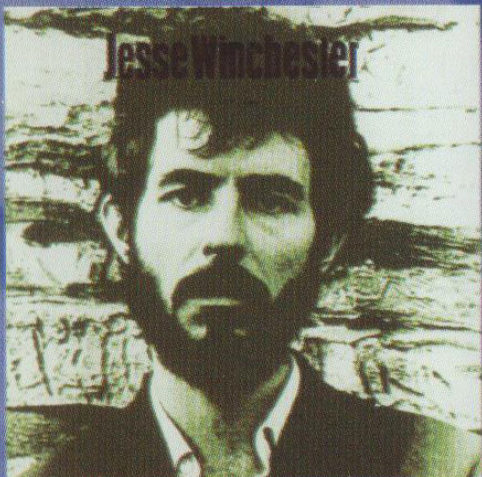
Rundgren's work. The ever-fickle press was still saying nice things, but *Third Down* suffered from Jesse's invisibility in the United States, and its low-key charms made it a tough sell to radio. Cover versions, which ultimately proved to be Jesse's lifeline, started appearing. Kenny Price scored a country hit with 'Biloxi.' The Everly Brothers cut 'Brand New Tennessee Waltz,' and Tim Hardin cut 'Yankee Lady.' Delbert McClinton and Wilson Pickett tackled 'Isn't That So.'



In August 1974, the month that Jesse's third album, *Learn to Love It*, was released, President Ford made a proposal for a conditional amnesty that would involve community service for returning draft evaders and deserters, but Jesse wanted nothing less than total amnesty, and made it clear that Canada was now his home no matter what. *Learn To Love It* included the original version of Russell Smith's 'Third Rate Romance,' which later became a Top 20 hit for Smith's group, the Amazing Rhythm Aces, despite its not-quite-ready-for-prime-time subject matter. Emmylou Harris and Waylon Jennings covered 'Defying Gravity.' 'Mississippi You're On My Mind' was a hit for the black country singer Stoney Edwards. Later, Barrence Whitfield cut it, although neither version had the exile's unrequited longing.

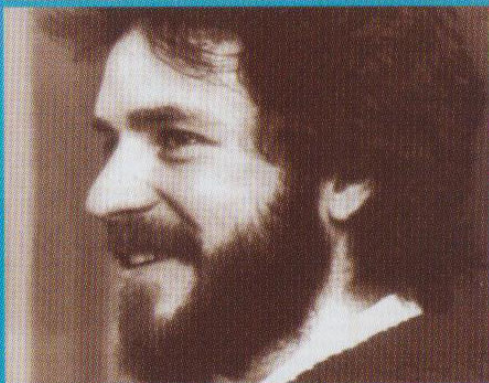
Grossman went the distance for the fourth album, *Let the Rough Side Drag*. "Albert wanted to sell a lot of records," said Jesse, "but no more than I did. I've always wanted to be a commercial artist, oddly enough. I wanted to be The Drifters; I didn't want to be a serious folk artist. Anything I thought was commercial, I was all for." There were at least half-a-dozen songs that Top 40 radio could and should have loved. Grossman had one eye on the market that Emmylou Harris, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings had opened up for left-of-centre country music, but there was no room for Jesse who was, in a sense, the only true outlaw in the bunch.

At Grossman's insistence, Jesse re-recorded 'Brand New Tennessee Waltz.' The original had been unavailable since Ampex Records folded, yet it was still attracting cover versions. Grossman felt that someone was going to have a big hit with it, and it might as well be Jesse.



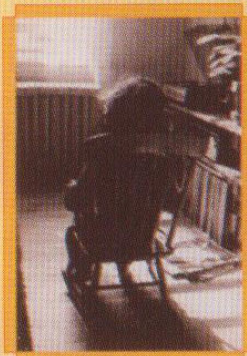
In April 1977, after ten years of exile, Jesse Winchester returned to the United States. For all those years, he had lived just half-an-hour from the American border, but had been unable to cross it. He hadn't

JESSE WINCHESTER



THIRD DOWN, 110 TO GO

Jesse Winchester



LET THE ROUGH SIDE DRAG

liked the word "pardon," but he'd wept a little when it came through. There was a U.S. tour to support Brian Ahern's high gloss production, *Nothing But A Breeze*. Ahern was a Nova Scotian who had produced Anne Murray and then Emmylou Harris, whom he'd married. Anne Murray, Emmylou, and Nicolette Larson sang back-up. Emmylou promptly covered 'My Songbird' and Nicolette Larson covered 'Rhumba Man,' which became a Top 50 hit for her. Nashville beckoned; Memphis beckoned. Jesse stayed in Montreal.

The mordantly dry 'A Showman's Life' from the Nashville-produced *A Touch On The Rainy Side* gives the clearest possible sense of Jesse's reservations about the promotional whirl. The final Bearsville album appeared in 1981. Grossman had struck a production deal with Willie Mitchell in Memphis, and Jesse recorded there. 'Say What' became his biggest hit, rising to No.32, and closed the door on his eleven years with Albert Grossman.

Jesse continues to write songs. He mails the tapes to his Nashville publisher. His hit rate has been pretty good. Wynonna Judd, Emmylou Harris, Michael Murphy, and The Mavericks have taken his songs. Jesse performs occasionally, torn between wanting worldly success and telling himself it's shameful making a display of yourself, trying to convince people how good you are. "I just don't have the desire to do it," he said recently. "I'm missing something vital. I'm more a writer than a recording star. It's more satisfying to sit in the background, and hear somebody else singing it on the radio. I don't have to compromise myself so badly. It's just better."

COLIN ESCOTT

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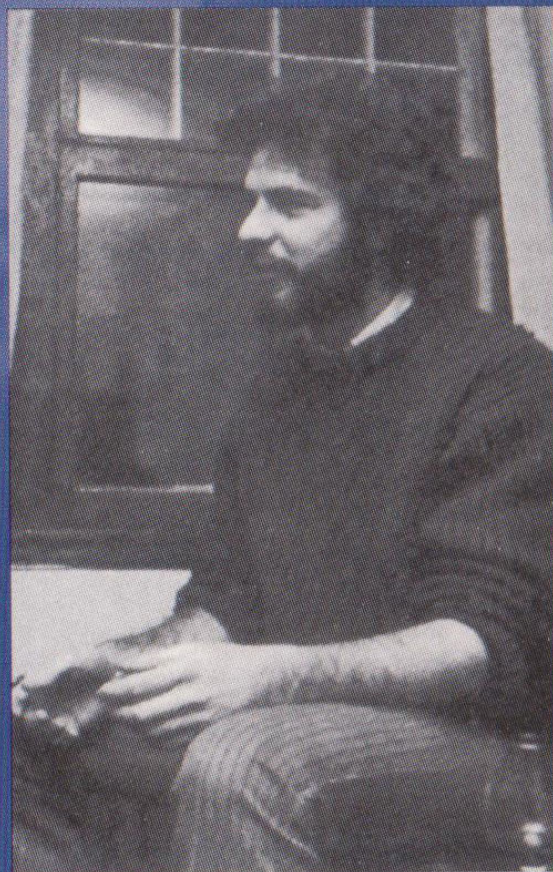
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Anthology • CD1

1. Isn't That So
2. Dangerous Fun
3. Do It
4. Midnight Bus
5. All Of Your Own Stories
6. God's Own Jukebox
7. Silly Heart
8. Every Word You Say
9. Mississippi You're On My Mind
10. Third Rate Romance
11. Defying Gravity
12. Let The Rough Side Drag
13. Damned If You Do
14. Lay Down Your Burden
15. Everybody Knows - But Me
16. Blow On, Chilly Wind
17. My Songbird
18. Rhumba Man
19. A Showman's Life
20. Wintery Feeling
21. Leslie
22. Say What
23. The Brand New Tennessee Waltz

Jesse Winchester • Jesse Winchester • CD 2

1. Payday
2. Biloxi
3. Snow
4. The Brand New Tennessee Waltz
5. That's A Touch I Like
6. Yankee Lady
7. Quiet About It
8. Skip Rope Song
9. Rosy Shy
10. Black Dog
11. Nudge

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Compiled by Colin Escott