

LOOKING FOR JESSE

I've never met Jesse Winchester, but I have three distinct memories of him. The first is from early 1970. I was 15 years old, rifling through the "assorted new releases" bin in the record

store, when I was stopped dead by the stark photograph staring out from his first album. It was a brown and white shot of a thin, bearded man with sunken cheeks and haunted eyes, standing in front of a wall as if he were facing a firing squad. I don't think I ever bought a record for the cover before or since, but that photo-

graph grabbed my imagination. The back of the album had the same picture, with the further enticement that the LP was produced by Robbie Robertson and featured both Robertson and The Band's Levon Helm. It was the winter between *The Band* and *Stage Fright*, the height of that group's creativity, and endorsement enough to get \$3.89 out of me. At home I opened the gatefold jacket, hungry for more information, and found nothing but that same haunted portrait staring back at me—twice.

The music was remarkable. Here was a voice that was rich, real, and full of experience—hard experience that seemed to be mostly held just beneath a polite surface. It was as if Robertson and Helm had found the real Virgil Cain, alive and living. . . . where? Nothing was known about Jesse Winchester and nothing was revealed here. He sang about the American South with a longing that implied he would never see it again, though at that time, the height of the counter culture, the notion of the South as a romantic place was startling. He also referred in passing to Vermont, Mexico, and being stuck against his will somewhere snowy. What crime had this character committed that kept him on the run? What sin was on his soul? I could not find any mention of Winchester in the rock press, and I knew no one at school who'd heard of him. For some reason I was not anxious to share the record with my friends. This was secret stuff to a teenage kid, music that revealed itself to you when you were alone, lying in the dark or staring out the window. Over the last 18 years I've met a number of people, often musicians, who had the

same reaction to *Jesse Winchester*. The songs were overpowering—they felt at once mysterious and true—but no one knew who the man was. His album was on the small Ampex label. He never played a concert anywhere I knew about. His songs were not on the radio. All there was to go by was that one haunted photograph and a voice that seemed to know all sorts of secrets it couldn't tell.

My second memory of Jesse Winchester is from early 1977, when he appeared in the flesh. I was 22, and by then my friends and I knew who Winchester was—a draft exile who had just been granted amnesty by the new President, Jimmy Carter. A show in Newport, Rhode Island, was promoted as Winchester's first U.S. date (though I suspect a number of stops on that first tour were similarly billed). A pal and I got there early and went to the dressing room to see if we could meet Jesse. The hippie at the door said, "Sorry, can't let you in." For some reason I had a baseball with me. I gave it to the hippie and said, "Tell Jesse, 'Welcome back to the U.S.A.'" A few minutes later the ball came back, signed by Winchester. It said, "Rounded third, headed for home."

By that time, seven years after the first album, Winchester was well-known in rock circles. In 1971 Elton John had made an album called *Tumbleweed Connection*, which his lyricist, Bernie Taupin, said was their attempt to duplicate the work of Jesse Winchester and The Band. Taupin told *Rolling Stone* that he dreamed of someday writing a song as perfect as Winchester's "Yankee Lady." After Ampex Records folded, taking the first

Winchester album with it, I had feared I'd never hear Jesse again, but he resurfaced in 1972 with a second album called *Third Down, 110 To Go*. That record was as open and warm as the first had been veiled. There had been stories about Winchester in the press then that explained he was the son of a Memphis military family who had gone to Canada instead of Vietnam and who was now married and settled in Montreal. *Third Down* exchanged Robbie Robertson's gothic production for some easy-going bar band direction by Todd Rundgren and Winchester's own homemade acoustic audio verite. If *Jesse Winchester* sang in the voice of an exile who would never see his home again, *Third Down* was an evening at home with the immigrant and his family. 1974's *Learn To Love It* combined longing for the old days ("Mississippi, You're On My Mind") with self-deprecating jokes about his own situation ("Tell me why you like Pierre Trudeau!") and two songs sung in Canadian French. Generously, Winchester also included a song sung by a member of his back-up band—"Third Rate Romance" by Russell Smith—which went on to become a big hit for Smith's Atlanta Rhythm Section.

There was also a sense of Christianity on *Learn To Love It*, less "born again" than traditional Southern Protestant, when Winchester sang lines like, "I'm baptised by water, so I'll pass on the one by fire." That gospel spirit filled the next LP, *Let The Rough Side Drag*, which swung like the doors on a rural church.

So by the time Jesse took that Newport Stage in 1977, he had already developed an impressive body of work and had

changed quite a lot from the harrowed wanderer of the first album. I recall that the Newport audience was excited to see a breathing, three-dimensional Jesse Winchester and delighted that he covered a range of emotions in his show, from the expected stiff-upper-lip melancholy of "Brand New Tennessee Waltz" to the contagious silliness of "Rhumba Man" (a new tune that would later become a hit single for Nicolette Larson). Winchester said in an interview at the time that he was the happiest he'd ever been.

After his return to the American stage in '77, Jesse made an album called *Nothing But A Breeze*, which included a lovely version of The Everly Brothers' "Bowling Green." Jesse's arrangement gave that old tune the same longing for lost paradise that made his early songs about the South so powerful. *Nothing But A Breeze* also featured the concert favorites "Rhumba Man" and "Twigs And Seeds." Those songs seemed to reflect Winchester's growing sense of himself as a performer, someone with an obligation to entertain the people who were coming out to see him play. The next album, 1978's *A Touch On The Rainy Side*, revealed the flipside of that mood with songs like the disillusioned "A Showman's Life." Those two albums contained some fine material, but the recordings now sound dated; the producers or players or Jesse himself were going for the slicker studio sound that was so common in late '70s pop. It was a style of recording that put special emphasis on a big, round, semi-disco bass sound. It was the style that got hits for, among others, Nicolette Larson and the Atlanta Rhythm Section, but

it was a fad and fixed the late '70s Winchester albums to a specific time in a way that his early albums did not. It was ironic that Winchester chose that moment to give in to pop fashion, for at the same time in England, new artists such as Graham Parker, Nick Lowe and Elvis Costello were trying to make records with that early '70s The Band/Jesse Winchester/Van Morrison feel.

Jesse's last album to date is 1981's *Talk Memphis*, an easy-going LP full of mature second looks at his old themes. The title track had the familiar longing for the South without the old sadness. Now that Jesse was a settled citizen of Canada who could enter the U.S. at his pleasure, he regarded Tennessee less as a lost Eden than as the old hometown; great to hear what's going on there, but not a place to which he'd move back. "I Love You No End" was a beautiful reflection on his first days with his wife. Ten years later, it illuminated the first person details of old songs like "Payday" ("I'll be holding the door and your coat for you and trying to be witty, and losing all my cool to win your favor") and the domestic scenes of *Third Down, 110 To Go*. You could say Jesse Winchester's seven albums brought him to maturity, though I prefer Lou Reed's phrase: He grew up in public.

My third memory of Jesse Winchester is just a few months old. In the spring of 1988 I was 33 and an editor of *Musician* magazine, which had just published my piece celebrating Rhino's re-release of the first Winchester album, the long-lost Ampex masterpiece. I passed by a small club near my apartment in Greenwich Village and

saw that Jesse Winchester was playing. The club had barely promoted the show. Several people later told me they had no idea Winchester was in town or they would have been there. There were fewer than 50 in the room for the late show—one-third were members of a local folk fraternity there to hang out and support their pals who were opening, one-third tourists wandering from cafe to cafe looking for beatniks, and one-third (perhaps a dozen people) Winchester fans like me who had stumbled onto the great songwriter playing in this little dive. Jesse was impeccable, performing a range of his old material and some fine new songs. But the tourists wandered in and out, one drunk had to be ejected, and the local folkies, who should have been trying to soak up some lessons from their better, talked through the set. Even Jesse's partisans were not all one might have hoped for. One annoying fan kept shouting for "Twigs And Seeds," a novelty song about marijuana that was fun years ago but is hardly the one Jesse Winchester song a sensitive listener would pick to plead for. What a rathole this place was. But Winchester handled it with dignity and beautiful manners. His eyes sometimes burned, but he never made a rude comment, never shushed the wine-drunk talkers; just played great song after great song. "A showman's life is a smokey bar and the fevered chase of a tiny star. It's a hotel room and a lonely wife. From what I've seen of a showman's life."

Winchester sang softer and softer, until people were leaning forward to hear. This was his show of strength, his assertion of his right to the stage. He did not raise his

volume to drown out the talkers, he did not start playing upbeat, singalong, or funny songs—he sang so quietly that at last people straining to listen told the pests to shut up, and the rudest of them became self-conscious and left. Winchester never acknowledged any tension. He delivered his material directly and finished the night with a very small audience who respected him. And then, once he'd achieved that, he raised his voice again and sang the upbeat songs, the crowdpleasers, even "Twigs And Seeds."

After the show I decided to go looking for Jesse Winchester to tell him how much his music's meant to me. Over the years I've had the chance to talk about his records with people who've worked on them, like Todd Rundgren and Robbie Robertson, and with many others who've loved them. Don Henley once called Winchester the new Stephen Foster. A few years ago I wrote a book about rock's best singer/songwriters, and Bob Dylan said to me, "Have you talked to Jesse Winchester? You can't talk about the best songwriters and not include him." I agreed, but Jesse Winchester was still a hard man to find. A while later I was having dinner with T-Bone Burnett, and he said, "Is Jesse Winchester in your book? He's really one of the greats." Elvis Costello later said the same thing. But at that point Jesse was no longer recording and I could not find him.

All this was on my mind when, after the bad gig at the bad club in 1988, I decided to finally meet Jesse Winchester. But when I went looking, he was already gone.

A couple of days later I ran into Dan

Zanes, the leader of The Del Fuegos, who told me he had never heard of Winchester until he read the *Musician* piece, but he'd just bought the first album and was knocked out. So I was delighted when the folks at Rhino Records invited me to compile a Best of Jesse Winchester album. I was liberated by Jesse's lack of Top 40 success; there was no need to put on a second-rate track because it was a hit. My only criterion was picking great songs.

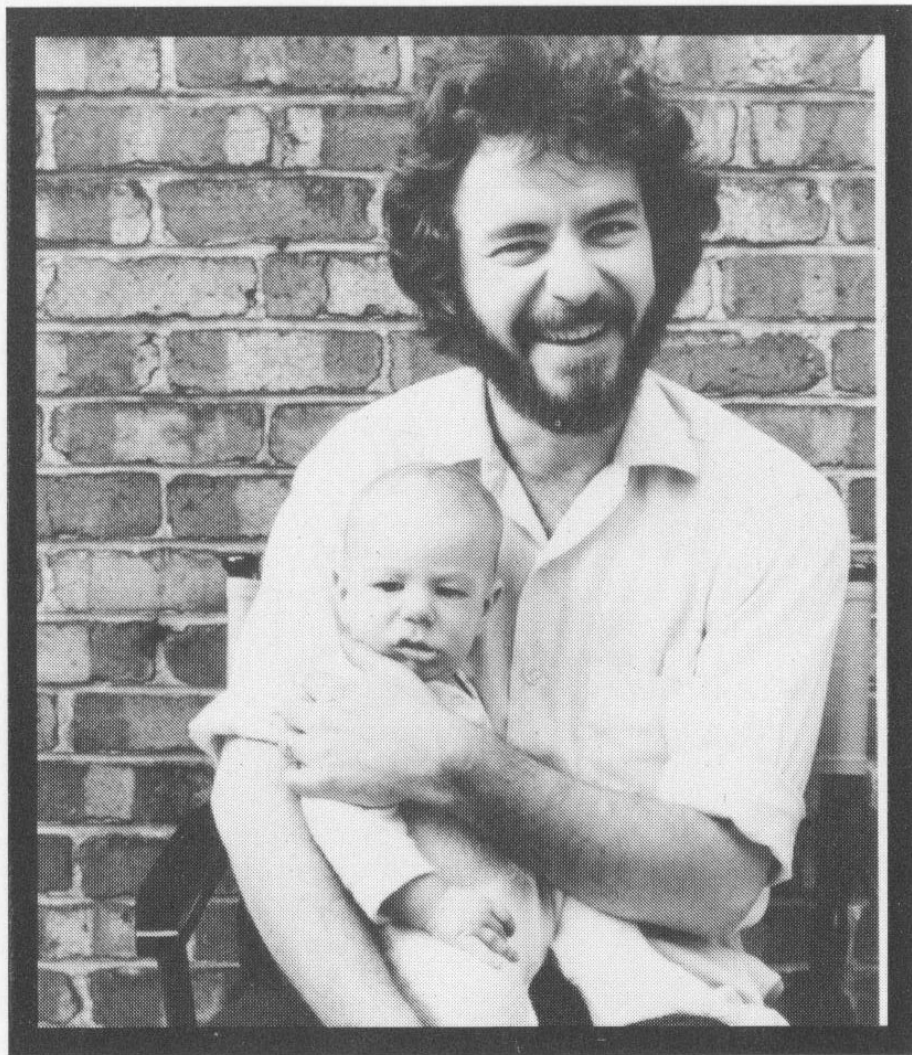
Winchester's three main characters—the exile longing for the South, the immigrant building a family in his new country, and the showman—all get turns at the microphone. Because he's written so many good songs, I found Winchester fans coming out of the woodwork to insist that such-and-such a selection *had* to be included. But it's not possible to reduce seven albums to one without shorting some favorites. It's hard to leave off a popular choice like "Midnight Bus" or a little-heard gem like "Reckon On Me," and the two signature songs from the first album that demanded to be included ("Brand New Tennessee Waltz" and "Yankee Lady") meant that great rock 'n' roll numbers like "Payday" and "The Nudge" had to be excluded. It's also true that one could compile a strong album of Winchester's songs of faith and temptation, from "Quiet About It," which articulates the pain of religious doubt, to "Working In The Vineyard," which trusts in the Almighty to come through. But we must limit ourselves.

I have Jesse Winchester's phone number here. I called last week and got his voice on an answering machine. I have put off calling back. I suppose after nearly

20 years of mystery and missed chances, I'm a little reluctant to talk to Winchester about the songs that have moved me so deeply. It's not that I think I'll be disappointed—the fact is, I'm curious as all hell—but that I don't want to nail down music that has proved so durable. Winchester's best songs leave plenty of space

for us to fill in our own details, and I would hate to deny any new listener the chance I had: To stare at Jesse Winchester's haunted eyes and listen to his resonant voice and be drawn into a new, unfamiliar world that somehow feels strangely like home.

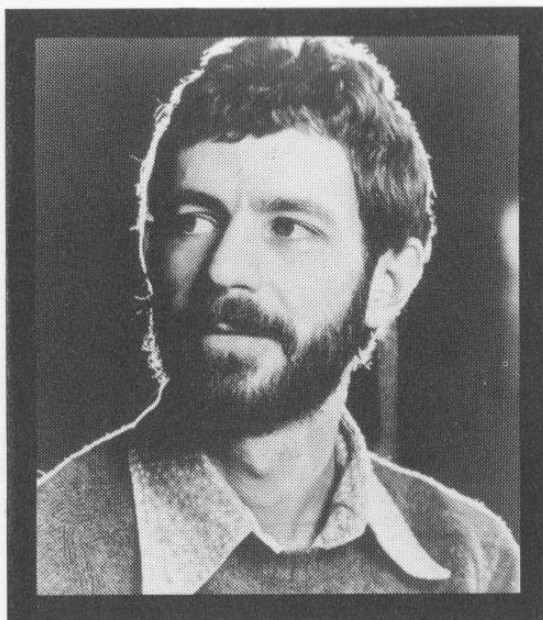
—Bill Flanagan, June 1988



1. **TELL ME WHY YOU LIKE ROOSEVELT** (2:48)
(from the LP "Learn To Love It," 1974)
2. **MISSISSIPPI, YOU'RE ON MY MIND** (3:27)
(from the LP "Learn To Love It," 1974)
3. **YANKEE LADY** (3:58)
(from the LP "Jesse Winchester," 1971)
4. **THE BRAND NEW TENNESSEE WALTZ** (3:04)
(from the LP "Jesse Winchester," 1971)
5. **BILOXI** (3:15)
(from the LP "Jesse Winchester," 1971)
6. **TALK MEMPHIS** (3:11)
(from the LP "Talk Memphis," 1981)
7. **BOWLING GREEN** (4:41)
(from the LP "Nothing But A Breeze," 1977)
8. **DO IT** (1:28)
(from the LP "Third Down, 110 To Go," 1972)
9. **DEFYING GRAVITY** (2:38)
(from the LP "Learn To Love It," 1974)
10. **SAY WHAT** (3:08)
(from the LP "Talk Memphis," 1981)
11. **I'M LOOKING FOR A MIRACLE** (4:11)
(from the LP "A Touch On The Rainy Side," 1978)
12. **DO LA LAY** (1:54)
(from the LP "Third Down, 110 To Go," 1972)
13. **SKIP ROPE SONG** (2:22)
(from the LP "Jesse Winchester," 1971)
14. **EVERYBODY KNOWS BUT ME** (2:53)
(from the LP "Let The Rough Side Drag," 1976)
15. **RHUMBA MAN** (3:30)
(from the LP "Nothing But A Breeze," 1977)
16. **A SHOWMAN'S LIFE** (3:46)
(from the LP "A Touch On The Rainy Side," 1978)
17. **DANGEROUS FUN** (2:05)
(from the LP "Third Down, 110 To Go," 1972)
18. **ALL OF YOUR STORIES** (2:33)
(from the LP "Third Down, 110 To Go," 1972)

All Songs Written by Jesse Winchester except "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt" (trad.) and "Bowling Green" (Ertel/Slater).

SEND FOR THE COMPLETE RHINO CATALOG! Includes complete track listings, photos, and descriptions of hundreds of our critically acclaimed classic rock compact discs, cassettes, and LPs. Also included are our campy cult videos, t-shirts, sweatshirts and MORE! If you're a music fan you won't be disappointed. Send one dollar check or money order (payable to RHINO RECORDS INC.), along with your name and address to: Rhino Catalog, 2225 Colorado Ave., Santa Monica, CA 90404



Compilation: BILL FLANAGAN
 Art Direction: MICHELLE LAURENCOT
 Design: DENNIS LOREN
 Graphic Assistance: STEVE ZDROIK
 Photos: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES, Venice, CA
 Digital Remastering: BILL INGLOT
 Special Thanks: MIKE GREEN/FLEMING & ASSOCIATES



© 1972, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1981 & 1989
 Bearsville Records, Inc.
 Issued under license from Bearsville Records, Inc.
 P.O. Box 135, Bearsville, NY 12409

RHINO

©1989 Rhino Records Inc.

R2 70085