

**I don't know anyone who dislikes Jesse Winchester's music. It seems to me that there are only those who love it and those who have never heard it. Jesse is a songwriter's songwriter, praised by every composer from Dylan down and covered by greats from Wilson Pickett to the Everly Brothers. Jesse Winchester's songs are like mirrors in which both performers and listeners can see themselves.**

Among Jesse's most prominent fans are Jimmy Buffett and Elvis Costello, both of whom have covered a number of Jesse songs on record and in concert, and both of whom performed with him on television in 2010 - Elvis on his **Spectacle** series and Jimmy on his **Concert For The Gulf** special after the BP oil spill. On the former Jesse sang a new tune, "Sham a Ling Dong Ding" that had both Elvis and guest Neko Case in tears. On the latter Jesse joined Jimmy, Allen Toussaint and Mac McAnally on "Rhumba Man" and "Biloxi" in front of 20 thousand enthusiastic fans. Buffett and Costello both took great pleasure in introducing one of their musical heroes to their own audience.

A year after that, in 2011, Jesse was told he had esophageal cancer. He stopped in the middle of a tour and began radiation treatments, followed by surgery. Immediately, Buffett and Costello agreed that it would be a good idea to put together a tribute album as a show of support. Buffett offered the use of his own office and staff to take care of the legalities, deal with

the various managers and record companies, and let this project born out of love and respect proceed without a lot of lawyers gumming up the progress. Mac McAnally of Jimmy's Coral Reefer Band, an award-winning songwriter and producer, offered to handle the technical side, gathering the tracks from the various artists, sequencing, mastering, and doing any mixing that was required.

Jesse was not told about the project - he had bigger concerns.

Word went out quietly and the response was immediate. James Taylor said he would love to cut "Payday." Rosanne Cash said she had always wanted to record "Biloxi." Lyle Lovett explained that he started out in college performing Jesse Winchester songs in coffee houses and still knew them by heart. When Bill Payne was asked if Little Feat would consider doing "Rhumba Man" he pointed out that the band had backed up Nicolette Larson on her cover of the song, a hit single in 1978. Lucinda Williams said that

when she was starting out as a songwriter Jesse Winchester meant the world to her. Rodney Crowell not only suggested recording “Dangerous Fun,” but brought along to the session EmmyLou Harris and Vince Gill. Vince then offered his own take on “Talk Memphis.” Allen Toussaint chose “I Wave Bye Bye,” a personal favorite obscure even to most Winchester fans. There was no recording budget - each artist paid for his sessions and backing musicians out of his own pocket. Everybody wanted to come through for Jesse.

At Christmas of 2011 Buffett wrote to Jesse and told him the album was coming, a gift from a whole bunch of grateful musicians and song-writers to a master. Jesse expressed his gratitude and had some good news of his own. He had beat the odds - after treatment and surgery the doctors had told him he was cancer free. Soon he returned to the road and as of this writing is performing again, making up for a lost year. A happy ending all around.

One sad note - Levon Helm, who played drums and mandolin on Jesse’s first album and had recently performed with him at his Midnight Ramble in Woodstock was anxious to record a track for this tribute. Levon’s own cancer returned around the same time Jesse got the all-clear. He passed away before he could add his own contribution. To fill the space Mac McAnally

stayed in the studio one extra day and recorded a tender version of “Defying Gravity.”

“I’m proud of the entire project,” Mac said. “We called it a labor of love before we knew how much labor and love it was going to take, but I stand by our initial assessment.”

Elvis Costello points out that it is quite remarkable how every song on this collection fits the style of each singer so well that you could swear he or she wrote it. Doesn’t “Gentleman of Leisure” sound like a Jimmy Buffett song (and high praise to Sonny Landreth for the house-burning solo)? Couldn’t “Mississippi You’re On My Mind” pass for a Lucinda Williams original? That is the real mark of Jesse Winchester’s mastery. His tunes are perfectly specific and beautifully universal at the same time.

This album is a tribute to a great singer/song-writer and also to the community of musicians who pulled together to show their love and respect to Jesse when he was down. Now that Jesse is back up, make sure you see him when he comes to your town. They are not making any more like him.

**Bill Flanagan - June 2012**