

**A**mong the more effective pieces of ordnance most writers keep close at hand is a gift for understatement. Jesse Winchester's arsenal has always been well-stocked. As he told a writer in 1976, "If I hadn't moved to Canada and made such a shock in my personal routine, maybe I wouldn't be in the music business."

His 1967 decision to just say no to the draft and the Vietnam War and head north was one of the first things most of us came to know about Jesse Winchester. This was well before the late, Louisiana-born (May 17, 1944) singer-guitarist-pianist was acknowledged as one of American music's premier songwriters, before his deeply felt, finely crafted tunes got cut by the likes of the Everly Brothers, Emmylou Harris, Wilson Pickett, Waylon Jennings, Allen Toussaint, Brenda Lee, Elvis Costello, Joan Baez, the Judds, John Denver and Jimmy Buffett, Lyle Lovett, Little Feat, Reba McEntire and Patti Page. This was back when his 1970, Robbie Robertson-produced Bearsville album *Jesse Winchester* became one of rock's most celebrated debuts. "Every patriotic American should listen to Jesse Winchester," opined Ed Ward in *Rolling Stone*, "the man who loved it and left it, because his songs transcend all barriers with the exception of one: art."

American audiences wouldn't see the acclaimed expatriate in person until a full decade after he'd left the country (following President Carter's declaration of amnesty for draft resisters, Winchester performed in Burlington, Vermont, in April of 1977). But they could hear him, on albums like *Third Down*, *110 to Go* and *Let the Rough Side Drag* and *Nothing but a Breeze*. And on a historic 1976 Montreal concert—the first live show to be broadcast internationally via stereo FM—which appears for the first time on this Real Gone disc.

Born in Bossier City, Winchester grew up in Mississippi and Memphis, took piano lessons and learned guitar, attended Massachusetts' Williams College and spent a year studying philosophy at the University of Munich. Upon graduation from Williams (he took his degree in

German), he got his draft notice. "It took me about two weeks to come to the decision," he told an interviewer of the move that ultimately "put him in the music business." In truth, Winchester had already entered the biz, having toured as a guitarist with a German band in Denmark and Holland. In Canada, he played in a half dozen outfits, including the French-Canadian Les Astronauts (he bailed, he explained to the UK's *Zigzag* magazine, when "the manager wanted us to dress up in leotards with silver lame and a kind of football helmet with antennae") and the R&B-oriented John Cold Water Group. Upon leaving the latter, he concentrated on songwriting; in 1969 in Ottawa, a friend introduced him to The Band's Robbie Robertson, which quickly led to his signing with Albert Grossman's Bearsville label and the album debut that rocked *Rolling Stone* and earned an A- in the *Village Voice's* Consumer Guide.

By 1976, Winchester had four albums under his belt, an enthusiastic if modest-sized fan base, and, beyond FM airplay, few means of exposure to American audiences. Which provided the impetus for Bearsville, and the artist-relations department of its parent label, Warner Bros., to stage the Oct. 13 concert at Studio Six Montreal, which was broadcast to such heavy-duty outlets as New York's WNEW, Boston's WBCN, Philadelphia's WMMR and Washington, DC's WHFS. "The atmosphere at the small Montreal studio," wrote pop critic John Swenson, "was so much like a living room that it was hard to believe it was anything more than a group of friends having a party."

That's exactly how it sounds. Backed by Marty Harris (bass), Bobby Cohen (lead guitar), Ron Dann (pedal-steel) and drummer Dave Lewis, Winchester, on guitar and piano, is typically relaxed and amiable. The repertoire is pulled in roughly equal parts from *Jesse Winchester*; *Third Down*; *110 to Go*; *Learn to Love It*; *Let the Rough Side Drag*; and the then-forthcoming *Nothing But a Breeze*.

Appropriately, Winchester opens the show with the rollicking "Laisse Les Bon Temps Rouler [Let the Good Times Roll]," from *Learn to Love*

*It*, then downshifts just slightly for “Silly Heart,” a warm, self-deprecating quasi-reggae tune whose narrator, “a hypothetical person who’s not very happy,” sings to “someone who seems to be enjoying him or herself on this Earth.”

Winchester’s debut LP is the source of the ominous-sounding “Black Dog,” which he introduces here as “sort of a Gothic number, I suppose” and one music writer heard as emanating from Jesse’s having undertaken “considerable thought about morbidity.” Two of the set’s best performances—of two of Winchester’s most durable compositions—also hail from that first album: “Brand New Tennessee Waltz” (his delivery, and the band’s supple, unrushed playing are a marvel) and “Yankee Lady.” The bittersweet saga of a grateful young Jesse and the Vermont woman who “kept” him, which one reviewer tagged “the most dangerous gotta-hit-the-road-babe song ever,” never fails to resonate, particularly its final verse, in which the lady’s kindness reminds Jesse of his worth “now when I see my own self as a stranger by my birth.”

*Third Down, 110 to Go* may not have received the volume of praise that *Jesse Winchester* did, but its repertoire makes a solid contribution to *Seems Like Only Yesterday*. Few singers could pull off what Jesse does on *Third Down*’s “Isn’t That So”: wax simultaneously sly and philosophic while musing on God’s intent and man’s inclinations: “Didn’t he know just what he was doin’/ Puttin’ eyes in this old head/ If he did not want me watching all the girls/ He’d a-left these two old eyeballs dead.” Like “Isn’t That So,” “Silly Heart” and the rocking “Midnight Bus,” “All of Your Stories” comes from the *Third Down* album. It’s a quiet high point of the broadcast, Winchester at the piano offering a meditation on time’s passage and the involuntary accretion of memories and narratives—some authentic, some fictive—that we all travel with. His characteristic generosity shines through, as he actively cuts his subject some slack: “Well, goodness knows you might have done better/ But

then heaven knows you might have done worse/ If you lit up the occasional candle/ You're allowed the occasional curse."

Memory, world-turns and lost treasures likewise animate the much-covered "Mississippi, You're on My Mind," though in a more straightforwardly nostalgic way than "All of Your Stories" or "Yankee Lady": here it's purely the details that evoke a place in the past—the John Deere tractor, dirty cotton lint and the state's "angry oven heat." Perhaps no songwriter since Stephen Foster has painted the South as well as Winchester.

The region's colorful vernacular lent the title to Winchester's fourth LP, which furnished three compositions to *Seems Like Only Yesterday*. As a kid in Bossier City, Jesse recalled, he and his father one day encountered an older resident on the street. "How's it goin'?", inquired Jesse's father. "Ohhh," answered the gent, "Let the rough side drag." "Let the Rough Side Drag (Let the Smooth Side Show)" gets a rousing rendition here, amped up by Ron Dann's pedal-steel and Jesse's barrelhouse piano (the song features one of his most famous couplets: "It's a good thing the sea's not dry/ It's a good thing that cows don't fly"). Less boisterous but more richly soulful are the other *Rough Side* entries: the loose blues-groove "Everybody Knows but Me" and the show-closing "Blow On, Chilly Wind (I've Got a Real High Collar)," a romantic-spiritual song of gratitude with a melody that slightly recalls the Amazing Rhythm Aces' "Third Rate Romance" (not so surprising: in pre-hit days, they worked as Jesse Winchester & the Rhythm Aces, and Winchester recorded "Third Rate Romance" on *Learn to Love It*).

Compared to the rest of the program's Winchester originals, "Twigs and Seeds," which would first appear on 1977's *Nothing But a Breeze*, may rank as the slightest track, but Jesse's cool-headed, Mose Allisonish delivery on the talking blues make it one of the most appealing dope songs from a period that exhaled an awful lot of them.

*Seems Like Only Yesterday* offers an abundance of evidence as to

Winchester's lyric abilities, musical chops and nuanced performing manner. It's the latter, though, that could be the most easily overlooked of his virtues; like Sinatra, he seems to effortlessly situate himself inside his material, assuring a good tight fit—no space between singer and song. Proof of his remarkable interpretive talent lies in the cover tunes he tackles here: the 1946 FDR tribute "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt" (where, fittingly, he adds Jimmy Carter and Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau to his heroes list), an accapella re-do of Clyde McPhatter's gospel triumph "I Can't Stand Up Alone" and, most notably, the tender, almost-spoken reading of the Everly Brothers' "Bowling Green" (check his priceless aside "I love the sight" following the line about Bowling Green girls wearing dresses "cut country tight"). Fond childhood recollection mingled with deep regret color "Seems Like Only Yesterday," Winchester's payback to black country singer Stoney Edwards, who wrote the tune. Edwards scored a Top-20 country hit with Jesse's "Mississippi You're on My Mind" in 1975.

"When the [Studio Six] concert was over," wrote reviewer Swenson in 1976, "Winchester seemed uncomfortable with the enthusiastic response, as if the recognition somehow spoiled the desired ambiance. He's going to have to get used to the feeling, though. Because he's liable to experience a lot more of it."

He did, producing eight more albums (excluding compilations), the most recent being last year's *A Reasonable Amount of Trouble*, which was nominated for two Grammy awards (Best Folk Album and Best American Roots Song, "Just So Much"). Jesse Winchester died at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, on April 11, 2014, after battling cancer.

—Gene Sculatti, *February 2015*

