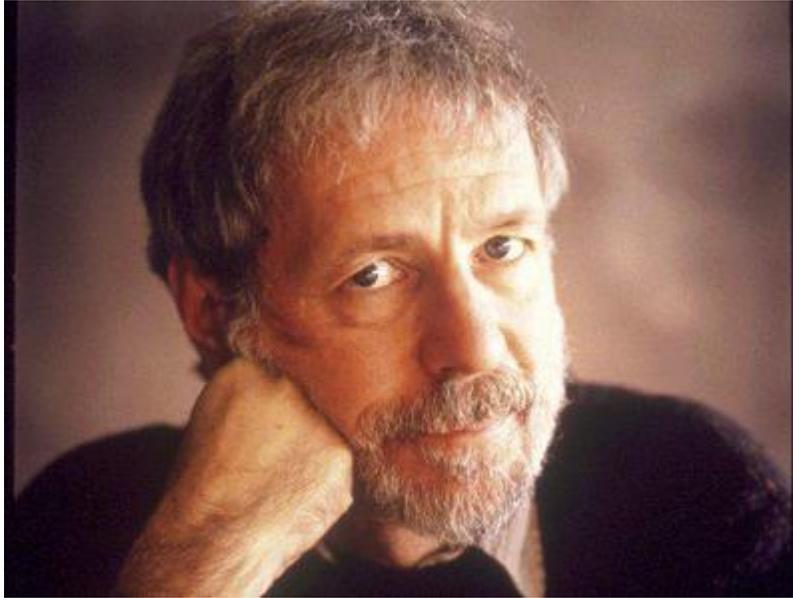


Jesse Winchester: Still doing the Rhumba

But the singer-songwriter admits he may be better known for politics than his music



JESSE WINCHESTER was raised in Memphis, Tenn., and schooled at an elite private college in Williamstown, Mass. He fled north in 1966 at the age of 22. He had played in bands in high school, but didn't start writing songs until he reached Quebec, releasing his first album in 1970.

If you were lucky enough to have caught Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review when it lumbered through Toronto back in 1975, you may remember a particularly poignant moment just before Joan Baez sang her beautiful rendition of Please Come to Boston.

Baez, one of the most respected protest singers of the time, dedicated the song to Jesse Winchester. She didn't have to explain why. Winchester was a fairly well known singer-songwriter living at the time in Montreal. He settled there after fleeing the United States to avoid the draft. The crowd at Maple Leaf Gardens gave her a huge ovation.

Although he was just one of an estimated 30,000 Americans who fled to Canada to avoid the draft, Winchester had become a symbol, even a hero, to those who opposed the war in Vietnam. (In Canada, the federal government of the time forbade customs agents from asking the military status of young Americans crossing into the country).

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That self-titled debut contained a song called The Brand New Tennessee Waltz, the first one he ever wrote. Joan Baez recorded a cover version. It also had a song called Yankee Lady, a top-10 hit in Canada for Winchester, and, became better known in the United States a couple of years later when the folk duo Brewer and Shipley recorded it.

At the time, a lot of people thought Winchester could have been as big a star as James Taylor if he had been able to launch his career back home in Tennessee.

“I don’t know what would have been down the road not taken,” Winchester says in his slow southern drawl when asked whether he could have had a bigger career in the United States. “It’s possible I got more notoriety from my political life than I would have gotten from my musical life. It’s just impossible to know.”

The word ‘hero’ continues to follow Winchester (as well as some less kind terms sent his way from supporters of the war). Last year, Margaritaville singer Jimmy Buffett introduced Winchester as “my personal hero” during a benefit concert in Alabama for victims of the BP oil spill. (Buffett recently recorded a version of Winchester’s Rhumba Man, which was also a top-10 hit for Nicolette Larson in 1977).

Winchester, who became a Canadian citizen in 1973, chooses his words carefully when asked about his “hero” status.

“I’m certainly not a hero,” he says. “I’m not sure what I am, but I know for sure that I’m not a hero ...”

He says that his decision to flee the draft was one of personal conscience.

“I just didn’t believe in the war,” he says. “I don’t think that I’m a pacifist. I can imagine situations (when war is necessary). I’m very proud of my dad for fighting in the Second World War. But I needed to really believe before I took up a gun.

“I was very young. I couldn’t tell you what was going through my mind at the time. I just didn’t want to even discuss it with anybody. I was so impulsive and ... righteous, you know, like a lot of people are at that age.

“When you’re that age, there is no tomorrow. Not that I regret it or anything, but I’m still sort of amazed at how ... I don’t know what the right word is ... I didn’t think of tomorrow, and maybe that’s just as well when you’re that age.”

The Vietnam War ended a few months before Baez’s dedication at The Rolling Thunder Review. Her song choice was a plea for Winchester to return home. Baez admitted to the sold-out audience, however, that she could understand why he may want to stay in Canada.

Baez was right. Winchester fell in love with his new country, married and raised a family. He learned to speak French (although he never stopped injecting “y’all” into his conversations). When the American government offered a full amnesty in 1977, he decided to stay in Quebec. He remained there until 2002, when a new love interest finally moved him back to the United States.

“I met (second wife) Cindy and fell in love with her and I just didn’t have the heart to make her learn French, it was hard enough on me,” Winchester says. “At that point, I decided it was time to go back.”

Winchester now lives in Charlottesville, Va. He still tours – he performs a sold out concert at the Hamilton Spectator Auditorium March 26 – but his recording output has been sporadic. Last year, he released Love Filling Station, his first album of new songs in more than 10 years.

“I’m just slow, very very slow,” he explains with wry humour. “And I got sort of discouraged by the record business. In the last little while, I’ve regained my enthusiasm and I’ll probably be a little more prolific in the future.”

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