

A New Canadian's Song of the South

By Larry Rohter

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One cold day in January 1967, Jesse Winchester, fresh out of Williams College with a degree in German, flew from his home town of Memphis to New York's LaGuardia Airport. Once there, he nervously approached the Air Canada counter and very quietly bought a plane ticket to Montreal.

"I spoke to the man almost in a whisper," he recalls. "I was sure there were police all around, and I was sure they knew I was going to Canada to avoid the Army."

In March 1977, Jesse Winchester, by now a Canadian citizen, returned to Tennessee, a beneficiary of Jimmy Carter's amnesty for Vietnam draft resisters. It was a rather spectacular homecoming, for Winchester had become something of a symbol: a singer and songwriter, hailed by some critics as the most gifted pop lyricist since Boy Dylan, whose career had been stymied because of his stand on the war, who was unable to perform in America because of his refusal to participate in that war.

That's not exactly how Jesse Winchester sees it, however.

"You have to remember that I wasn't a musician when I went to Canada," he says. "If I had remained in America, I doubt that I'd ever have written a song or made any records. I just kind of drifted into music."

In fact, says Winchester, who is now on his first U.S. tour and last night opened a six-day engagement at The Cellar Door, when he first got to Montreal, he tried to find "a straight job, teaching or something like that. But everyone noticed my southern accent and got wary of my commitment of Canada," so he eventually joined up with a French-speaking rock 'n' roll band.

"I'd studied a little French in college, but it was Parisian French, and I wasn't ready for what I heard in Quebec," he remembers. "We would play all these little mining and lumber towns in Northern Quebec, and the other guys in the band would go down to the bar and watch the hockey game on TV while I stayed in my room," unable to communicate with anyone.

It was then that his songwriting career began - a career that has produced "Yankee Lady," "Biloxi," "Brand New Tennessee Waltz" and other songs recorded by artists as different as Joan Baez and Wilson Pickett. Soon after, his adjustment to Canadian life began: He found an apartment on Montreal near McGill University, started playing in small clubs there, and met and married an Acadian woman from New Brunswick.

Nowadays the only thing that keeps Winchester from being the perfect Quebecois is his Tennessee drawl. When he talks about life in the U.S. it's always "your politicians" and "your television stations." Winchester voted for Rene Levesque's Separatists in last fall's provincial

election - though he still admires Pierre Trudeau - and when his son Jamie starts school next fall, it'll be at a French-speaking kindergarten.

And yet Winchester writes his songs not about Canada, but about the South: Louisiana, where he was born in 1944: Mississippi, where his family vacationed every summer and owned a large farm: and Tennessee, where an ancestor named James Ridout Winchester had founded Memphis in the early 1800s.

"The twig was severely bent, but I've always written about the South, and I guess I always will," Winchester concedes. "In a way, living in Montreal, in another culture, speaking another language, is what makes it possible for me to write about the South. It gives me distance, a perspective I wouldn't have if I were there."

That's presumably what Robbie Robertson of The Band thought when he first heard Winchester's work in 1968. He arranged for Winchester to sign a recording deal with a label headed by Albert Grossman, Dylan's former manager, and produced Winchester's first album, a classic collection of blues and country-based music that has been followed by three more critically acclaimed albums.

Winchester hasn't yet performed any of these songs in the South. But elsewhere on the tour, which began two weeks ago in Vermont and will end in Hawaii sometime this summer, audience response has been enthusiastic - so much so that Winchester is actually a little concerned.

"It's the old 'do you love me just for my body' syndrome," he says. "I sometimes wonder whether it's my music they're applauding, or my politics."

Many pop performers wouldn't especially care about that, but Winchester, a thin, intense and serious man, is worried about acquiring a "martyr" image he feels he doesn't deserve. "I live comfortably," he says "I work regularly, and whenever I want to eat steak, I eat steak. I'm not there to proclaim my vindication, either. It's over now, and I'd like to leave it that way."

Nor does Winchester feel culturally deprived. "The same books are available in Montreal," he notes, "and anytime I want to, I can tune in the television stations in Burlington (Vt.). Besides, most of the things that I gather were happening in America in the late '60s also were going on in Canada - hippies and psychedelics, revolution, rock 'n' roll, all that."

It also helps, he says, that his family and relatives accepted his decision to go to Canada, and later to give up his U.S. citizenship, with only a few qualms. "Some of them wrote to tell me they would pray for me," he says, bemused, "but my mother understood why I went, and my brother, who was always interested in music, was also encouraging."

Yet despite all this, Winchester plans on remaining in Canada and preferably in Montreal. "I like living where I am," he says. "But I'm going to be playing in America a lot, just like everybody else. There's a lot here I haven't seen.

"On the way in, I saw the Washington Monument for the first time, I'd like to see the White House, the Lincoln Memorial and the Jefferson Memorial while I'm here. I'd like to see all the things I didn't get to see when I was an American."