

Jesse Winchester

At Home On Both Sides of The Border

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Songwriter Jesse Winchester discovered a passion for music at a young age, but it took an act of Congress and a life-altering choice to turn his passion into a career.

Winchester, the man behind such songs as "Oh What a Thrill" (The Mavericks), "Let's Make a Baby King" (Wynonna) and "You Remember Me" (Reba McEntire) was born in 1944, the son of an Air Force Captain stationed in Shreveport, La. But the young Winchester's roots could be traced back to the rich history of the town of Memphis, Tenn., where the Winchesters were one of the city's founding families. His great-great-great-grandfather was responsible for getting Davey Crockett into politics, and his grandfather gave the funeral oration at famed Memphis jazz musician W.C. Handy's funeral. Robert E. Lee was a blood relative while another early Winchester invented the famous firearm that bears the family name.

When Winchester was still an infant, the family moved to Mississippi where his father had decided to try his hand at farming. It was there that Winchester first latched onto music. "Since I was an infant, my mother tells me music was always my focus," he recalls. "They sent me off to take piano lessons early." When he was 12, the family made the move home to Memphis where Winchester came under the spell of early rock 'n' roll and honky-tonk country. "In Memphis, there was a lot of black music around. I just loved that right from the beginning." He adds, "And of course, there was country music. It was a great place to grow up."

After graduating college with a degree in German in 1967, the future musician found himself in a difficult position. The Vietnam War was in full swing, and the 22-year-old Winchester found himself in opposition to it. That opposition was put to the test when he was drafted that same year. In what became a life-changing decision, Winchester chose to leave the United States and move to Canada to avoid the draft. Winchester reflects on his choice, "I was so young and naive that it wasn't that difficult a decision. I just wasn't thinking very far into the future, which a lot of young people neglect to do."

His decision landed him in Montreal, Quebec. It was there that Winchester began to sow the seeds of his songwriting style. "I got a job with a French bar band, and we started playing in tiny little towns way up north," he remembers. But the young musician did not speak much French. "I was so isolated, not being able to communicate with anybody, that's when I started writing songs. I would retire to my hotel room and write songs."

But economics also played a hand in the development of his style. He soon tired of the grind that goes along with being a musician on the road and made a change. "At that point I didn't really have a lot of choice. I had quit the band I was in, it was just too tedious. So I started

playing solo and to do that you mainly played in places where people expected you to write your own songs."

Winchester's big break came in 1970 when he was introduced to Robbie Robertson, founding member of The Band. Robertson got Winchester a deal and produced his first album. That self-titled album was a critical success and led Winchester to record eight more albums over the next ten years. Meanwhile, recording artists back in the states began to take notice of Winchester's well crafted songs, and soon the likes of Emmylou Harris, Jonathan Edwards, John Denver, Joan Baez, and Jimmy Buffett were recording them. Winchester laughs when he recalls, "I can remember I did a brief tour with Jimmy Buffett, opening for him. He's recorded several of my tunes. Anyway, I began to play one of them in my set and people in the audience were annoyed with me because they thought I was singing one of Jimmy's songs. It's kind of the story of my life."

Winchester's story took a new direction in 1977 when President Jimmy Carter pardoned all those who had evaded the draft during the Vietnam War. "It was the first thing that Jimmy Carter did after his inauguration. I was on the road, and somebody phoned me in my hotel room and told me. I just sat down on the bed and wept, I was so moved."

He made a well publicized return to the states that same year and embarked on his first U.S. tour. He also returned home to Memphis for the first time in 10 years. He continued to record and tour up until 1981, and aside from the well-received 1988 Sugar Hill offering, *Humor Me*, dropped out of site, choosing to remain in Canada.

Fast forward to 1999 and the release of his latest recording, the aptly titled *Gentleman of Leisure*. He jokes, "It's uncomfortably close to the truth." Produced in Nashville by famed Dobro master Jerry Douglas, the disc finds the now 56-year-old writer in peak form with 13 songs that are pure Winchester. From the opening groove of "Club Manhattan," to the closing chords of "I Wave Bye Bye," Winchester reasserts his skill as a master craftsman of song.

About his songs, Winchester is quick to state, "I work hard on them. I am almost more an editor than I am a writer." He elaborates, "The songs come simultaneously. A little kernel comes into my mind, which is always lyrics and melody together. It's just one or two phrases, but in those phrases everything else is implied. The melody is already there, all you need to do is extend it. And the attitude is there, whether it's going to be humorous or blue or angry, it's all there in those two lines. From that point it's really just craft, sitting down and fleshing it out. That's the work part." As for his subjects, "I make up quite a bit of the stories and create the characters out of whole cloth sometimes, but it's all grounded in real feelings. But I don't have to be miserable at a given point to write a song about being miserable." He's quick to add, "I can remember very well what it's like."

Judging from the tone in Winchester's voice when asked about the recording of his new album, the process was nothing short of a pleasure. For instance, the lyrics of the aforementioned "Club Manhattan" make reference to a "young Steve Cropper." Winchester tells the rest. "I didn't

realize that Steve lived in Nashville, so when Jerry and I were talking about the details of the album, he said, 'why don't we just get Cropper to come in and play.' Well, I said yes! It really was a thrill for me. When I was a teenager just riding around Memphis, I had no idea that this was ever going to happen to me."

Another song on the album, "Sweet Little Shoe," owes its genesis to the English comic writer P.G. Wodehouse. The clever title was inspired by one of his characters, Bertie Wooster. Says Winchester, "Bertie says at one point, 'I swung a dash deficient shoe,' which meant that he was a good dancer." Winchester put his own Southern slant on the phrase and gave it a swamp rock beat.

Winchester also explores his spiritual side with the gospel-fired "Wander My Way Home" and the thought-provoking "That's What Makes You Strong." His take on the subject is not what might be expected. "I write kind of weird gospel music," he observes. "It's gospel music sung by someone who's got one foot in heaven and the other foot, he just can't seem to pull out of the muck sometimes. I can't be absolutely positive about things, I'm not sure I'd want to be. It's your mistakes, it's your weaknesses that lead you to these revelations, not necessarily your strength."

Winchester also got the opportunity to team up with one of country music's biggest stars, Vince Gill. The high lonesome Gill sings a stunning harmony to Winchester's sensitive lead on the heartbreaking "Just Cause I'm in Love With You." Winchester seems particularly thrilled with the teaming of the two. "That's another kick. I mean, what a voice! I was a little shy to be singing with him, but it worked out great."

As for the recording process itself Winchester flatly says, "It's so much fun, it still is. Just walking into a studio gives me goose bumps. I go over and sit down at the piano, it's always a thrill." He's also more than pleased with the finished product. "It's one of the few that I've made that I can listen to and be in the same room with. I know what it's like to feel otherwise." He gives a big nod to producer Douglas and engineer Bil Vorn Dick. "Working with Jerry was such a thrill. I'd do it any day. And Bil is just a brilliant guy, he knows his music, so he deserves a lot of credit for it. I'm happy with this one."

Winchester is also excited about his upcoming U.S. tour, his first in 10 years. "I'm excited about that, and I'm spending a lot of time rehearsing my old material," he says. "I play solo. I get frustrated with a band. What I do onstage is not really that much about music and notes anyway. I'd rather suggest the parts in people's minds and let them play the bass and drums in their heads. It's less is more."

As the conversation winds down, Winchester himself offers a candid assessment of his essence. "When I dodged the draft, the way the deal worked, I could avoid the war in Vietnam, but I'd never ever be able to go back to Memphis. That became so fixed in my mind that I purposely made myself into a Canadian. I resolved to be a good Canadian. Then when it turned out that I was allowed back, it was already too late. There have been times I have been tempted

to come back, but I have three children here, and I love Quebec."

He pauses for a moment then concludes, "But I still consider myself a Southerner in my heart. My taste in music, in food and language is still Southern. But I like living in the North. I can't really explain why, it seems to suit me."

Perhaps the answer as to why may be found in the lyrics of Winchester's 1977 song, "Nothing But A Breeze."

*I'm the type of guy who likes it right down the middle
I don't like all this bouncing back and forth
Me, I want to live with my feet in Dixie
And my head in the cool blue North.
Bertie Wooster couldn't have said it any better.*

