

THE RETURN OF JESSE WINCHESTER

New Offering Ends Singer's 11-Year Recuperative Silence

PUBLISHED IN THE TORONTO STAR, Sunday, September 19, 1999

By Nick Krewen

Silver-tongued songwriter JESSE WINCHESTER is eleven years wiser and his hair a little greyer since we last heard from him with his 1988 album *Humour Me*.

He's back in 1999 with *Gentleman's Leisure*, and one might assume from the album's title that his absence included some down time cavorting on a luxurious yacht, sipping pina colodas and soaking up Mediterrean rays.

Yeah. Right.

"I just got burnt out," admits Winchester, whose stature through ten albums and 28 years has always been more satellite than star, orbiting the peripheral between respectability and reverence.

"I was discouraged. I was repeating myself. I felt I was saying the same thing in concert every night. It made me feel awful.

"And it seemed like the only thing that was making me money -- or ever had made me any money -- was writing songs for other people. So I decided to just quit and write songs for other people."

Known for his clever, gentle odes of laid-back, relaxed country blues, often salted with a slight Memphis swing -- the lust-laden "Isn't That So" and the humorous marijuana anthem "Twigs And Seeds" are prime examples -- Winchester has been overlooked when it comes to scoring the big hit.

Even album sales have been nominal, despite such acclaimed earlier classics as his ROBBIE ROBERTSON-produced *Jesse Winchester* debut, or *Third Down, 110 To Go*, overseen by TODD RUNDGREN.

As a songwriter for country artists, Winchester has enjoyed more consistency. REBA McENTIRE, WYNONNA JUDD and THE MAVERICKS, who enjoyed a Top 20 hit in 1994 with Winchester's "O What A Thrill," have been good patrons to the Shreveport, Louisiana born, Memphis-raised song sculptor.

Ironically, the Jesse Winchester name may be more associated with the craftsman as the draft who relocated to Montreal in the late '60s to avoid conscription into Vietnam War.

"It leaves my courage and cowardice an open question, I suppose," Winchester says in his soft Memphis drawl as he sits in his room at The SkyDome Hotel.

He chuckles.

"Maybe if you had another war to offer me, maybe I could do a better job for you. That war was just wrong on the face it. If the idea was to stop Communism and the way to do that was killing them, then everybody knew where there were a whole lot more Communists than there were in Vietnam. Let's go get them there."

Although U.S. president JIMMY CARTER granted amnesty for draft dodgers in 1976, Winchester, who became a Canadian citizen in 1972, says he's reluctant to relocate.

"When I came to Canada, the bargain was that I'd avoid the war in Vietnam as long as I never came back," says Winchester. "So I said, okay, it's a deal. With that attitude, I was going to become a Canadian. When the amnesty happened, I had already had ten years of being a Canadian, raising a Canadian family. My life was in Montreal."

Today the twice-divorced father of three lives in Quebec's Eastern Townships, 120 km from Montreal.

"I like it where I am," he admits. "I'm not happy with our political situation, but I'm not sure if I'd be happy with the political situation anywhere."

"I like Quebec. I like speaking French. Speaking French makes me feel smart and creative."

For the recording of *Gentleman Of Leisure*, Winchester traveled to Nashville and hooked up with bluegrass dobro legend JERRY DOUGLAS.

"That was a stroke of genius," admits Winchester. "We hit it off very, very well."

It was Douglas who suggested VINCE GILL join in for vocals on the tender love ballad "Just Cause I'm In Love With You," and to use patriarch acapella vocal group THE FAIRFIELD FOUR for the gospel-flushed shuffle "Wander My Way Home."

The biggest thrill of recording *Gentleman Of Leisure* for Winchester was the involvement of his boyhood hero, Stax and BOOKER T. & THE MG's guitar legend STEVE CROPPER. Cropper appears on the songs "Club Manhattan" and "Just Like You."

"Oh yeah!," Winchester exclaims. "When I was a kid he was a hero, for a lot of reasons, not just musical. Booker T. & The MG's had two black guys and two white guys, and seemed to be what Memphis is all about, or what it could be until MARTIN LUTHER KING got killed. So yeah, he was a hero of mine for a very long time. He was a dream to work with."

Winchester says that Jerry Douglas also proved to be a breath of fresh air from past producers.

"He let me play," says Winchester, who performs keyboards and guitar to complement his singing.

"Jerry respected me as a musician, and I didn't always get that from other producers. Some considered me another bearded weirdo with a guitar and that was that. It was exhilarating to be playing with these people."

Although Jesse Winchester has been known to take a dip or two into political waters for his song fodder, *Gentleman Of Leisure* doesn't swing left or right.

"What my songs seem mainly to focus on is relationships with women or relationships with God. I tend to get those two confused," he laughs.

Besides returning to the studio, Winchester has resumed performances, although a Toronto date in early 2000 seems more likely than 1999.

DISCOGRAPHY

1971 -- *Jesse Winchester*

1972 -- *Third Down, 110 To Go*

1974 -- *Learn To Love It*

1976 -- *Let The Rough Side Drag*

1977 -- *Nothing But A Breeze*

1978 -- *A Touch On The Rainy Side*

1981-- *Talk Memphis*

1988 -- *The Best Of Jesse Winchester*

1988 -- *Humour Me*

1999 -- *Gentleman Of Leisure*

©1999 Nick Krewen, Octopus Media Ink