

Back in 1970, Rolling Stone was still primarily a music magazine. The first issue in August that year was a pretty typical edition: the lead story gave an exhaustive account of Janis Joplin's first solo tour; Sam and Dave split up after 10 years; Steve Winwood has just reformed Traffic; The Rolling Stones' imminent album "Get Yer Ya – Ya's Out" was eagerly anticipated. But for many readers, the piece that made the greatest impact was on the record review section. Pride of place was devoted to a comprehensive and infectious enthusiastic review of the debut album by an unknown singer. The singer was Jesse Winchester.

Jesse Winchester was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on 17 May 1944, but his formative years were spent in Memphis, Tennessee. He was evidently a musical youngster, playing piano by the age of six, and graduating to the local church organ when aged twelve. However, his musical tastes changed in 1959 with his discovery of rock 'n' roll, and the acquisition of his first guitar. As the sixties progressed, Jesse played with a number of bands in the local venues – bars, dance-halls and colleges. He attaches particular significance to the musical experience of the Memphis area, and states that white musicians playing in Memphis considered themselves as playing 'black' music – in contrast to their Nashville neighbours, who played 'white' music. It is difficult to disagree with this assessment of the importance of the Memphis experience, when he cites Elvis Presley as the best example of this phenomenon. To this day, Jesse considers that black musicians are the best in the world.

1967 was a decisive year. The U.S. military authorities sent Jesse draft papers. He decided not to go to Vietnam and, as was the case with many young men at that time, he moved across the border to Canada. Thus in January 1967 he settled in Montreal. He was immediately at a language disadvantage: the dominant tongue in Quebec Province is French, and Jesse had only a rudimentary grasp of the language from school. However, for a brief spell, he joined a local band whose members spoke only French, and this spur greatly improved his linguistic abilities. Jesse also started to put down roots: he married a French speaker, Leslie.

He concentrated on writing his own material and gradually built up an audience through playing small clubs in the area. It was early in 1970 when he played as support act to The Band in Montreal. He made such an impact that Robbie Robertson persuaded The Band's manager, Albert Grossman, to sign Jesse to his fledgling record company, Bearsville. The Band were then nearing completion of their third album 'Stage Fright', engineered by Todd Rundgren. As a consequence, when Robbie Robertson returned to Canada to produce Jesse's album, he was accompanied by Todd Rundgren who again undertook the engineering duties. They were joined by Levon Helm whose drums and mandolin, together with Robbies's guitar, augmented the band of local musicians on a number of tracks.

It was decided to supplement the musical impact with a strong visual impact: the services of Ron Cato – who also designed the ‘Stage Fright’ album sleeve – were secured. His creation was certainly memorable: a sepia head-and-shoulders photograph of Jesse looking unkempt, with a solemn, resigned expression on his face, in front of a rough stone wall. In case the front of the album didn’t make the full impact the identical photograph appeared on the rear and, to make absolutely certain, a gatefold sleeve was used: opening the album revealed two further identical sepia images. The effect is extremely similar to that of the sleeve of The Band’s second album – the one with the sombre black and white photograph of the musicians surrounded by a sepia border. So there seems to be a visual connection; the Rolling Stone review certainly made a musical connection in observing that the whole album could be a footnote to ‘King Harvest’ (the final track on The Band’s second album). The starkness of the image was complemented by the album’s title: ‘Jesse Winchester’. Bearsville did not yet have its own label, so it was released by Ampex Records (A – 10104).

‘Payday’ shares the distinction of being the opening track both on ‘Jesse Winchester’ and on this CD. It is the most forceful rock and roll performance recorded by Jesse. Its appeal was not lost on the Flying Burrito Bros., who recorded it soon afterwards. Jesse switched from guitar to piano, and from rock to ballad, for the idyllic ‘Biloxi’ – subsequently recorded by Ian Matthews. With one exception, every song on that first album was written by Jesse: ‘Snow’ was co-written with Robbie Robertson. It is a witty, heartfelt comment on the winter climate of Canada; it is also one of the catchiest melodies on the album. Listen a few times to ‘The Brand New Tennessee Waltz’, and you will understand why this beautiful song is Jesse’s most covered composition. Notable versions include those by the Everly Brothers, Joan Baez, Matthews Southern Comfort – and Jesse Winchester (he recorded it again six years later on ‘Let The Rough Side Drag’). In a similar vein to ‘Payday’ is ‘That’s A Touch I Like’; it obviously appealed to Alvin Crow, whose recording gave it a Western Swing treatment. For many, the standout track on Jesse’s debut album was ‘Yankee Lady’, featuring Levon Helm’s masterly mandolin accompaniment. Subsequent recordings by Tim Hardin, Southern Comfort and Stoney Edwards testify to its compelling appeal.

Following the release of the first album, Jesse recorded another three songs in Autumn 1970, produced by Todd Rundgren. However these were not heard until late 1972, when the second album ‘Third Down, 110 To Go’ (Bearsville BR 2102) was released. (The little derives from Canadian football, and alludes to a pretty impossible situation). One of the 1970 tracks is featured here: ‘Midnight Bus’ is the punchiest track on that album, and was a highlight in the repertoire of the fondly-remembered Chilli Willi & The Red Hot Peppers. The remainder of Jesse’s second album involved a much more laid-back approach, supported by a group of

sympathetic musicians including Amos Garrett (guitarist extraordinaire) and N D Smart (drums) – both from Bearsville's 'house band', Hungry Chuck (whose album is again available on See For Miles SEE 220). 'Do It', 'God's Own Jukebox', and 'All Your Own Stories' convey the warmth and appeal of this album.

Jesse began to tour rather more extensively and, despite President Ford's amnesty for draft-resisters, chose to remain in his adopted country that he had grown to love. One of his tours was with the Amazing Rhythm Aces; he was strongly influenced by their music. So much so that two songs composed by the Aces' lead vocalist, Russell Smith, were among the many highlights of Jesse's 1974 album 'Learn To Love It' (Bearsville BR 6953). The first Aces' song was the incisive 'Third Rate Romance', where Jesse permitted Russell Smith to take the dominant vocal. Jesse's taste was impeccable – when the Amazing Rhythm Aces released 'Third Rate Romance' as a single in 1975, it was a US top twenty smash. Jesse took the vocal on the other Russell Smith composition, the insistent 'The End Is Not In Sight'. Among the many songs on the album that were penned by Jesse were 'Mississippi, You're On My Mind' and 'Defying Gravity'. 'Mississippi...' had been gestating for a while: it featured on a 1970 demo tape in an early version as 'The Farm'. The wait was worthwhile: 'Mississippi...' is one of Jesse's most enduring compositions, and has attracted many cover versions, including those by Johnny Tillotson and Stoney Edwards. 'Defying Gravity' is one of those insidious songs that creeps up on you. It certainly reached the ears of Emmylou Harris and Jimmy Buffett, each of whose recordings is well worth seeking out.

1976 saw the release of 'Let The Rough Side Drag' (Bearsville BR 6964), represented here by three songs. Two of these, the title track and 'Blow On Chilly Wind' were to appear – along with a third Jesse Winchester song – on Jonathan Edwards' 1977 album 'Sailboat', produced by Brian Ahern and featuring Emmylou Harris' Hot Band. Jesse has written a number of gospel songs over the years: 'Lay Down Your Burden' is a good rousing example of this aspect of his music.

The involvement with Emmylou Harris' entourage led to Jesse's 1977 album 'Nothing But A Breeze' (Bearsville BR 6968): produced by Brian Ahern, and featuring contribution from Emmylou, Ricky Skaggs, James Burton and Glen D Hardin. Emmylou's distinctive vocals contribute greatly to the title track and 'My Songbird'. The latter song made such an impression that Emmylou Harris recorded her own rendition on her next album. 'Nothing But A Breeze' was covered by John Denver in an unusually spirited version: Jesse appreciated the composer royalties. The other selection from this album, 'Seems Like Only Yesterday', was composed by Stoney Edwards, and thereby enabled Jesse to return the compliment for Stoney's previous support. Jesse's vocals on this track were accompanied by Anne Murray and Herb Pedersen.

1978 saw Jesse travelling to Nashville for the Norbert Putnam produced album 'A Touch On The Rainy Side' (Bearsville BRK 6984). The title track is a characteristically melodic Jesse Winchester rendition. 'I'm Looking For A Miracle' is one of Jesse's gospel songs. It demonstrates his approach to this music, "the problem with my gospel songs is that I keep sticking little bits of doubt in there, that sort of sour the thing – I hope the Lord understands".

Jesse's last album for Bearsville was 'Talk Memphis' (BRK 6989), released in 1981. As the title suggests, this saw Jesse returning to Memphis – for sessions produced by the legendary Willie Mitchell. 'Say What' slides into a hypnotic groove, and is over all too soon. Just one track on the album, was not recorded in Memphis: 'Leslie', Jesse's affectionate dedication to his wife, was recorded at Bearsville's own studios in New York State. The final track 'Talk Memphis' is Jesse Winchester in a funky setting – it works surprisingly well.

Listen to this collection and you will hear for yourself that the acclaim given to Jesse Winchester in 1970 was justified not only for his recording debut, but also for the consistently excellent series of albums which followed. You will also hear that the magic of Jesse Winchester's music is a combination of his artistry as a singer, and his skill as a songwriter. Indeed, because of the extent to which his songs have been recorded by other singers, it is currently the case that he is better known through other artists' performances than for his own recordings. This compilation from all seven albums recorded by Jesse Winchester between 1970 and 1981, will extend the recognition due to this talented musician.

By Sandy MacDiarmid

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Liner Note Correction

From time to time there have been factual errors in online mentions of the genesis of Jesse's recordings of Russell Smith's "The End is Not In Sight" and "Third Rate Romance" on *Learn To Love It*. In the Liner Notes above, Sandy MacDiarmid noted that Jesse learned the songs while touring with the Amazing Rhythm Aces and that he allowed Russell Smith to take the vocals on the "*Third Rate Romance*" recording. The vocal was actually by future Amazing Rhythm Aces drummer Butch McDade, and it was Butch who was responsible for bringing Russell Smith to Jesse's attention while a member of Jesse's band in the early 70s. There was never a tour with the Amazing Rhythm Aces, as the liner notes states, although Russell did come to Montreal to meet Jesse. Butch's raspy voice later provided the great low harmony on the Aces version, and also on Jesse's "Wake Me" and "Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt," among others. Future Amazing Rhythm Aces bass player Jeff "Stick" Davis later joined Jesse's band and also participated in the *Learn To Love It* sessions.

~ Steve Deady – ("*Jesse and the Wallbangers*" guitarist around the time of *Learn To Love It*)