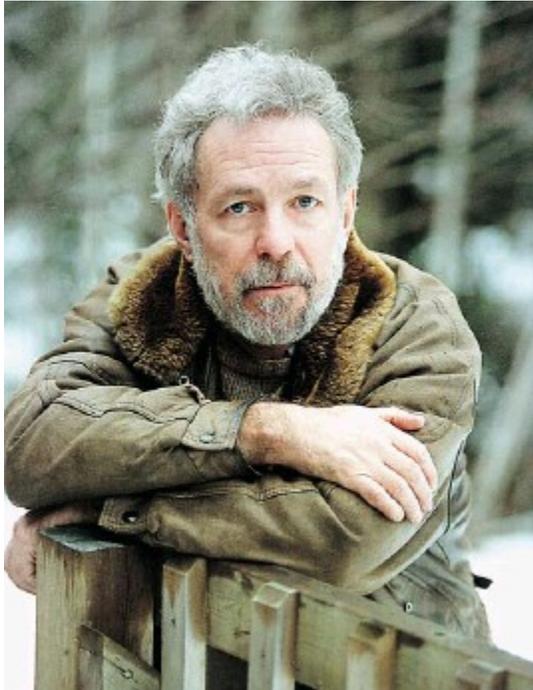


THE SWEET SORROW OF JESSE WINCHESTER

He was the songwriter's songwriter — a timeless musician who came to Montreal to avoid the draft and helped define the folk-club scene here. "From the moment he'd appear on stage, you could hear a pin drop."



GORDON BECK/ GAZETTE FILES

Jesse Winchester will be remembered as one of the songwriting greats of his era.

Jesse Winchester, 69, considered by many of his contemporaries to be a songwriter's songwriter, died Friday of cancer of the esophagus.

Diagnosed in 2011, Winchester was treated and continued to perform. The Louisiana-born musician's last appearance in Montreal — where he lived for a large part of his 35 years in Quebec — was at Petit Campus less than a year ago. A worsening of the disease this year led to the cancellation of several shows, including concerts scheduled for this month at Hugh's Room in Toronto and the Aeolian Hall in London, Ont.

Ron Sexsmith, another critically-acclaimed songwriter, said Winchester was an inspiration to him in his early career, as Sexsmith incorporated a more folk-oriented style with his pop sensibilities. "(His music) was shining a light on the kind of songwriter I wanted to be: straight ahead, unpretentious and with a singular purpose," Sexsmith said. "It didn't feel like he was trying to write hit songs. They were very much front-porch musings and a lot of simple wisdom. That's what I wanted to do.

"You could listen to any record from any period of his and you're not going to hear subpar material. If he had 10 or 12 songs he was excited about, he was going to record them," Sexsmith said.

“Obviously, he didn’t have the big hits that some of the songwriters had, but it’s all there for anyone who wants to discover it,” Sexsmith said. “When I think of the great songwriters, it’s that guy writing in solitude, about real things, and giving you something you can’t get anywhere else. That’s what he did.”

“Songwriting still means a lot to people, even though it’s not what the media are on about or what awards shows are on about. (Winchester’s era) was a golden moment in time, when singer-songwriters were worshipped and people really had the time to sit and listen and let the songs resonate in a quiet way. He was the real deal,” Sexsmith said.

Matt Large, whose company Hello Darlin’ Productions promotes live roots music in Montreal, put on four Winchester shows over the years, including last year’s swansong at Petit Campus. He remembered Winchester as “one of the absolute writing greats of our era,” with a gift for efficiency in his words.

“He was such a sweet and gentle guy,” Large said, remembering how Winchester would always call him “kid” and his wife Rebecca “darlin’”. “He was not a diva at all. He was the sweetest man you could ever want to meet. (Before performing,) a cup of coffee and some quiet is all he wanted. And from the moment he’d get on stage, you could hear a pin drop and he had the audience in the palm of his hand.”

Stuart McLean, who showcases singer-songwriters every week on his CBC Radio show The Vinyl Cafe, said Winchester’s songs were timeless. “He wrote standards is what he did,” said McLean, who often saw Winchester perform live in Montreal in the late 1960s. “His music always reminded you of an autumn day, when you’re feeling a sense of wistfulness.

“There was a sadness to the music, but it was a controlled sadness. It’s that kind of sweet sorrow that really is at the heart of life,” McLean said.

“He had his own connection to music. The musical room he played in in 1970 was the same room he was always playing in,” McLean said. “Leonard Cohen talks about not knowing where the songs come from and how he would go there more often if he did. Jesse didn’t move from (his) musical room. He was timeless.

Winchester moved to Montreal in 1967 after receiving his draft notice.

“It’s strange, but I respect the people who went to Vietnam. It was just the way you saw it. If you believed in the reasons for it, it was your duty to go. If you didn’t, then I don’t see how you could go. If you’re gonna pick up a gun and shoot somebody, you better believe,” he said in a 1995 Gazette interview.

After a brief stint with the Quebec group les Astronautes, Winchester began to play folk-club concerts in Montreal at venues like the New Penelope and the Yellow Door. A turning point came when a demo tape he recorded in Ottawa in 1969 made its way to Robbie Robertson, leader of The Band, whose manager, Albert Grossman, released Winchester’s debut album on his Bearsville label in 1970. Robertson was the producer and, with fellow Band-mate Levon Helm, played on the record.

That self-titled long-player remains, for many, Winchester’s definitive statement — as beloved by many songwriters and critics as some of The Band’s own classics.

He began performing in his native country in 1977, after U.S. president Jimmy Carter declared amnesty for draft resisters.

After his 1988 album, *Humour Me*, was issued, Winchester moved to Magog and put his recording career on hold. When he returned to the studio with *Gentleman of Leisure*, it had been 11 years between releases. He moved to Virginia in 2002.

His final album, *Love Filling Station* (2009), included *Sham-a-Ling-Dong-Ding*, a deeply melodic and sentimental song he performed on Elvis Costello's *Spectacle* television series, leaving fellow guest Neko Case in tears and Costello uncharacteristically speechless.

Winchester's songs have been covered by such artists as the Everly Brothers, James Taylor, Allen Toussaint, Emmylou Harris, Wilson Pickett, Joan Baez, the Walker Brothers, Lyle Lovett and Anne Murray

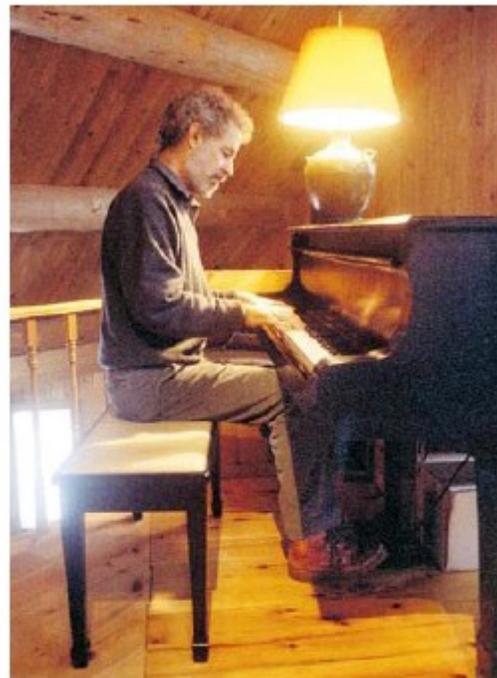
Writing, Winchester told the *Gazette* in 2000, is "more editing — cutting stuff out, and singing it over and over and over again so that when the singer delivers it, it doesn't sound like poetry. It sounds like somebody talking to you."

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