

Music

On the road again

>> Singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester returns to Montreal

by JOHNSON CUMMINS

Through his thick Memphis, Tennessee, drawl, legendary singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester tells me about the circumstances that led him to set roots in Montreal in the 1960s.

"When the draft was starting up, I knew I had to get out, so I took out an encyclopedia and it said Montreal was the biggest Canadian city and it was the [world's] second biggest French-speaking city. I just packed up and left with no intention of going back to the U.S. and I've been here ever since."

Winchester finally became a card-carrying Canadian in 1973. In 1977, American President Jimmy Carter persuaded Congress to grant a blanket amnesty to Americans who evaded the Vietnam-era draft, but the expatriate Winchester showed no interest in returning to southern soil. Instead, he retreated to the Eastern Townships.

The postmarks on the majority of Winchester's paycheques have always largely come from the States, though. After having made it as a performer a couple of decades back, Winchester has become one of America's (notably Nashville's) top-shelf songwriters, having penned hit songs for Wynonna Judd, Elvis Costello, Waylon Jen-

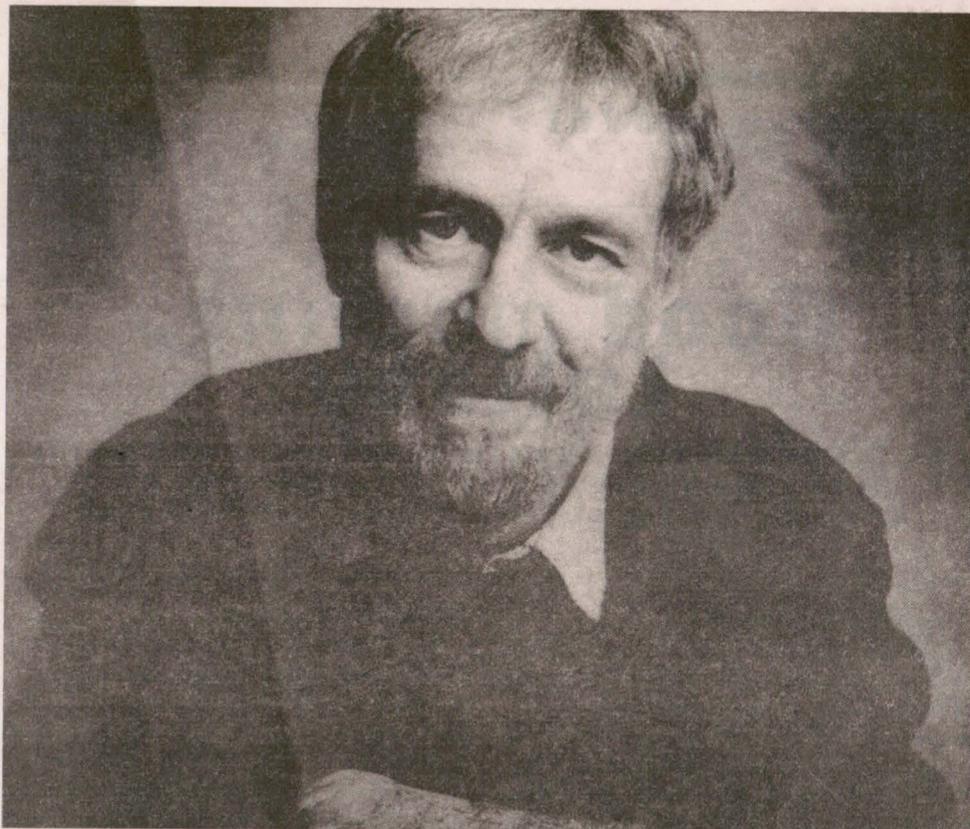
nings, Jimmy Buffett, Reba McEntire, Joan Baez and scores of others.

Winchester says the money for penning other people's songs was so good that, for a time, he even hung up his performing hat and just sent his songs out in the mail. But now, after 11 years as a songwriter, he has returned to performing his own songs and couldn't be happier with the results.

"I guess I'm back to performing because—this is going to sound pretentious—but, I just think I do the best versions of my songs. I have rarely enjoyed the other people's versions. When I was starting to write for other people, it was because I would make more money that way than if I did them myself. I guess now my ego has gotten in the way and I just want to play my own songs again."

LEISURELY LEGEND

His new record *Gentleman of Leisure* shows Winchester in his prime as both a songwriter, as well as a performer. Through the gospel leanings in "Wander My Way Home" to his more trademark country sound on "Evil Angel," Winchester's husky baritone croon seems tailor-made for every melody it's put to.



Yankee dodger: WINCHESTER

Along with the help from legendary guitarist Steve Cropper (Booker T and the MGs), Vince Gill and production wizard Jerry Douglas (Bill Frisell) it seems like Winchester had little chance for failure. The legend was still worried, though.

"I packed up my car and was driving down to Nashville to start the record and all I kept thinking was how the hell I was going to get out of doing it. I was really scared, wondering if I could do it

again. I mean, when I quit performing I was really burnt out on it. I was catching myself saying the same things onstage and I just wasn't getting too much out of it. But now, after taking a break, and going back onstage and into the studio... I really feel like this is the happiest time of my life." ©

JESSE WINCHESTER PLAYS WITH LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III AT THE SPECTRUM ON JAN. 15,

(2000) \$23.50, 8PM