

Time Out

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WINCHESTER:

'...every person knows what's right in their heart...'

Jesse Winchester is a rare combination of artist and historical figure. As a singer-songwriter, his albums have been praised for their eloquent haunting understatement by critics from dozens of publications (Tom Zito in the *Washington Post* said, "Winchester is a master of the simple lyric, a sentimental view tempered with a sense of humor"). Discovered by The Band's Robbie Robertson, who produced his first album in 1970, his songs have been recorded by Joan Baez, Jimmy Buffett, the Everly Brothers and Jonathan Edwards; he numbers among his staunch fans such superstars as the Eagles, Jackson Browne and Waylon Jennings.

Yet Jesse is equally well-known as one of the thousands of Americans who moved to Canada in the 1960s rather than be drafted into the Vietnam war. He is a member of a prominent Tennessee family with roots going back to the founding of the city of Memphis, and related by blood to Robert E. Lee.

Jesse's act reflected the response of much of American youth to the tumultuous sixties. Likewise, his first American tour ever and first American visit in over 10 years (following President Carter's pardon), reflects to many a healing of America's wounds.

"I feel the pardon was an act of mercy," said Winchester in *People* magazine. "I never expected it. Justice would have said I could never come back, but mercy allowed the pardon."

Jesse's new album, *Nothing But a Breeze*, produced by Emmylou Harris' producer Brian Ahern has, even before its release, attracted more musical attention than any of his previous efforts. At last able to tour America, it appears that Jesse Winchester's moment has arrived, as he jokingly puts it, "after a ten-year drum roll."

Born in Shreveport, La., on May 17, 1944, his real name is James R. Winchester (after his dad, and Air Force Captain stationed in Louisiana at the time).

The Winchesters are one of the founding families of the city of Memphis. Jesse's great-great-great-great-great grandfather was responsible for getting Davy Crockett into national politics. His grandfather gave the funeral oration at famed Memphis jazz musician W.C. Handy's funeral. His father, hating World War II, became, in Jesse's words, "one of the original hippies in the late Forties; he decided against joining the family law firm to take up farming instead and get closer to the land." The family farmed in

Mississippi until Jesse was 12 and then moved to Memphis where his father finally did get a law degree and practiced there until he died when Jesse was 18 in 1962.

Jesse attended Williams College in Massachusetts and graduated in 1966 with a B.A. in German. In high school, Jesse had begun playing music—first as a drummer—and later as a piano player in two local bands, one called The Midnighters and the other the Church Keys. In college he spent much of his time playing music.

Facing the draft at the height of the Viet Nam war, Jesse thought long and hard and decided to move to Canada rather than be required to fight in a war in which he didn't believe. "It was a very hard decision," he recalls, "and my mother didn't tell me what she thought at the time—she said I had to do what I felt was right. She later said she thought it was the right decision. The hardest part was hurting my grandfather who was the patriot of the family. He was my father's father, and I was very close to him spiritually. He had a strong sense of honor and duty and his attitude could be summed up by the phrase "my country, may she always be right, but right or wrong, still my country." What made it even more difficult was the fact that a cousin of Jesse's had been shot down and killed in Vietnam.

On the plane to Canada he reflected on the start of a new life. "I realized I could be anyone I wanted to be there." He knew from the beginning that he would become a citizen of Canada, "because I had to make it into a positive rather than a negative act—that I was going toward something rather than away from something." With an electric guitar, a suitcase and \$200, Jesse entered Canada. "When they asked me how long I was planning to stay, I said 'forever'. I was lucky to have a good immigration guy who advised me on what to do." He found everyone in Canada hospitable and soon answered an ad from a newspaper and joined a band called Les Astronauts. After working with them for \$125 a week for some time, they decided they wanted him to dress in leotards, gold lame and a football helmet. He quit and began playing as a solo artist, writing and singing his own songs.

He developed his unique, poetically-understated style and, in 1969, he was "discovered" by the aforementioned Robbie Robertson who produced Jesse's first album in 1970, titled *Jesse Winchester* and containing such

memorable songs as "Yankee Lady", "Brand New Tennessee Waltz" and "Biloxi". Warmly embraced by critics and other musicians, Jesse's work had limited exposure in the U.S. because of his inability to tour here. His subsequent albums, *Third Down, 110 to Go* (1972, which includes "Isn't That So"), *Learn to Love It* (1974, including "Defying Gravity" and "Mississippi You're on My Mind") and *Let the Rough Side Drag* (1976, including the title cut and "Blow On, Chilly Wind") have all added to his reputation.

Jesse has played to Canadian

audiences on numerous coast-to-coast tours. He has also appeared in Australia and was warmly received during a European tour during the summer of 1976 which took him through Britain, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Belgium and Switzerland. Midnight Bus, a group of Canadian musicians Jesse has assembled over the past year, is currently backing him on his debut Stateside tour. Midnight Bus consists of Martin Harris on bass, Bobby Cohen on Lead guitar, Ron Dann on pedal steel and Dave Lewis on drums.

Although he is not a devout Catholic, Jesse clearly expresses a personal religious commitment when he says the purpose of life is "as much as possible to imitate God." Talking of the changes in the United States and the world he says, "I don't think that Congress can pass any laws that can solve the problems. If there's lying and cheating in the world it's because there's lying and cheating in us. Each individual is going to have to straighten up. Organized religion is not the answer for me. I think every person knows what's right in his heart. Cynicism is passe."

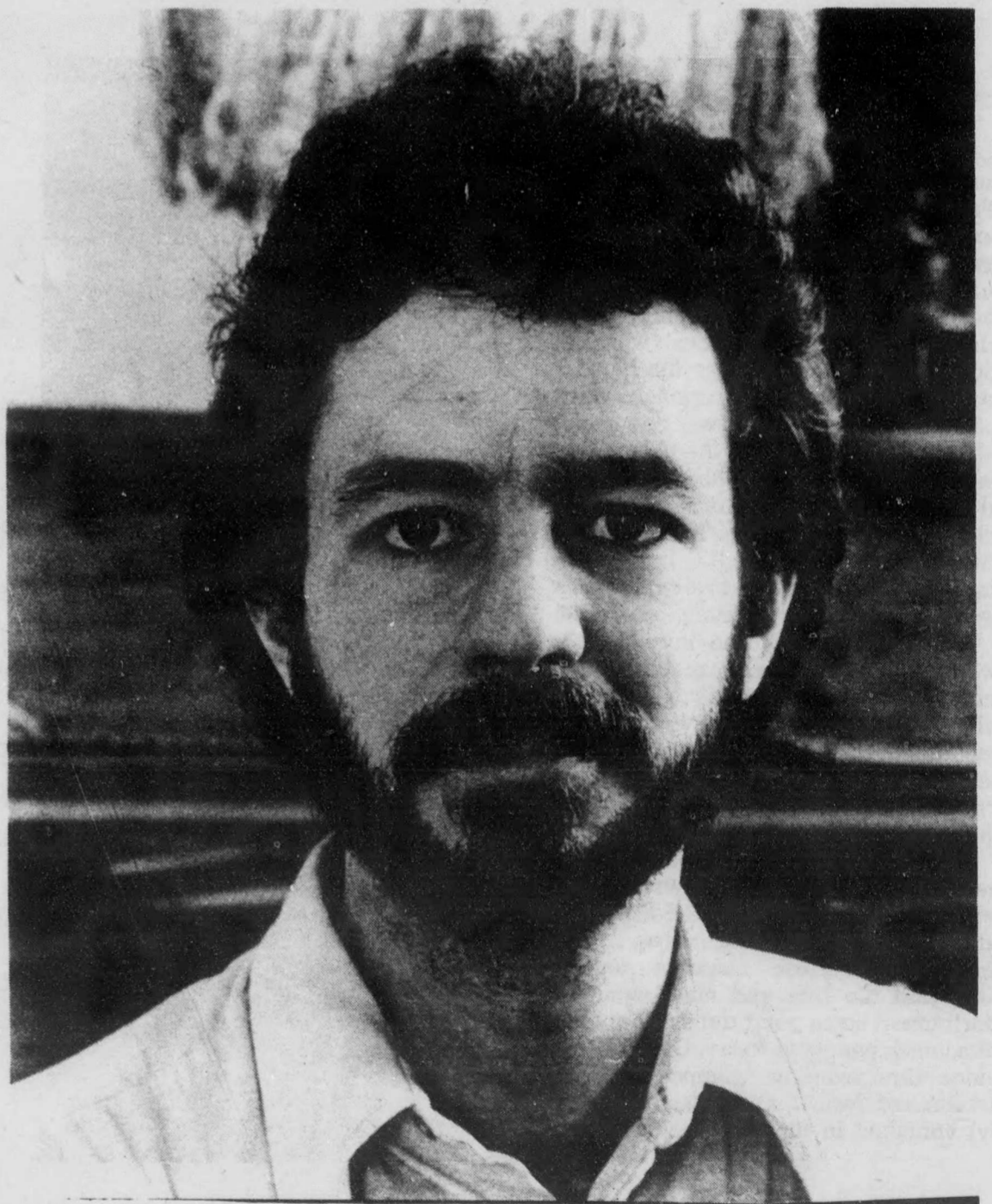
As far as Jimmy Carter is concerned, Jesse says, "I was for him long before the amnesty because he believes in something. He has ethics. I believe he is erasing a blot that's been on the South and I like the South. I like Southern music and Southern food and Southern accents."

Coming home to visit his relatives on March 11, 1977, more than 10 years after he'd left, was "a very emotional moment. I'd forgotten how beautiful Memphis

is although it has changed a lot—fast food things all over the place. But it felt real good to be back, see American money and hear American accents." Wanting to keep his homecoming private, he shunned media requests to photograph him getting off the plane or meeting his mother. "I didn't want my homecoming to be in the supermarkets like Cher's bellybutton". Yet he is excited about his new album and first American tour and looks forward to playing for American audiences.

Jesse is not interested in dwelling on his decision 10 years ago. "I think it's more important how you live with the decisions you make. I thought I was right; there were people on the other side who thought they were right, but I certainly don't want to make an issue of it now. It's like having a fight with your wife—at a certain point you just have to start over. I feel a war is like a tornado that comes through and it's out of everybody's hands."

Jesse's tall (5', 11") and a slender 120 pounds. He met his wife Leslie in 1972 after one of his concerts. She's now 26 and they have two children, James age 5 and Alice, 2. He describes his life in Montreal as that of "an ordinary family... we go ice skating in the winter and bicycling in the summer. I read a lot of history and take photos" which he sometimes develops in his own darkroom. If at last he achieves commercial success he would spend money on "an old Canadian stone house and a recording studio where I would work on perfection in music."



JESSE WINCHESTER: having to live with his decisions