

A Conversation with Jesse Winchester
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 8/2009)

One of the pleasures of this job is to occasionally meet someone on the phone who feels like Jesse Winchester does on the other end. He seems to be okay with who he is, and consequently you may feel very good about who you are at that moment, and that sets up a nice playing field for conversation. We were talking about his new CD on Appleseed, *Love Filling Station*.

He sounded like Memphis. Yes he did, unmistakably so, even after all those years in Montreal, since 1972. Even though Carter declared Amnesty for draft dodgers five years later, he stayed another 25 years with no intention of returning, till his current wife brought him back, eventually to Charlottesville, VA.

Writer of many great and much covered songs, Winchester is on the short list Dylan cut out as among the most significant of his generation. He can get that slow groove going like J.J. Cale or Tony Joe White, but he'll do it on the nylon string guitar. In his case, it's the song that holds it together, not the groove. In fact, lately I keep going back to the song "I Turn To My Guitar," whose self-effacing majesty is so inspiring.

Co-producer Bill Vorndick, the songcatcher of the acoustic world in Nashville, did a stellar job of bringing in the first-call one-take guys who had the right vibe, like Jerry Douglas. Some of the nucleus were killers from Ricky Skaggs' band, Mark Fain on bass and Andy Leftwich on fiddle. But monster guitar players like Russ Barenberg, Guthrie Trapp, and Bruce Dees sizzled and occasionally exploded throughout. Bob Mater was so right on the drums and Claire Lynch really brought the Dolly home on "Loose Talk," one of the three covers.

This is the artist's first solo release in nine years. We got to get more records out of this guy. So let's all buy this one, and he's sure to cut another. In his time.

Puremusic: It was a real pleasure to hear this new record, it sounded like the voice of musical sanity.

Jesse Winchester: [laughs] Well, I can't account for that, Frank, but anyway...

PM: No it's really -- those of us who really like your music are certainly glad to see it come around. How are you these days, and how is life treating you?

JW: Great, thank you, Frank. I hope the same for you.

PM: Thanks so much. Yeah, I was in Nashville for many years but now I'm in Miami Beach.

JW: Wow.

PM: Yeah, it's nice down here. How did this Appleseed recording *Love Filling Station* come together with Bill Vorndick and the acoustic A-team?

JW: Gee, it was my wife's nagging, I guess, more than anything else--

PM: [laughs]

JW: And I think Keith Case, my booking agent, connected me with Appleseed.

PM: I see. And then Bill Vorndick, I mean, he's the perfect guy to have done this record. How did that work out that he was the guy and brought you up to his studio, et cetera?

JW: Well, Bill and I have worked together several times before over the years, so he was just the first guy I always turn to for things like that.

PM: I've worked some with bassist Mark Fain myself. Isn't that guy really something?

JW: Yeah, Mark is great. He's a good man.

PM: At our buddy Thomm Jutz' studio, we used to solo his tracks and just listen to those, and they sounded like songs all by themselves.

JW: Yeah, he's a beautiful player, he really is.

PM: Now, when you were down there, you didn't meet a great keyboard player named Steve Conn in Nashville, did you?

JW: No.

PM: I only mention it because your speaking voices have an uncanny resemblance. He's played with Bonnie Raitt and a lot of great people. But you sound exactly alike, it's strange.

JW: Oh, yeah?

PM: So, although President Carter declared amnesty back in '77, you didn't show back up in the States until 2002. Did you love it up there?

JW: Yes, very much. I didn't really intend to come back. And it's only because I met Cindy, and I just couldn't ask her to learn French.

[laughter]

JW: It's just too cruel to do that to somebody. It's a hard language. And to at that point I decided, well, maybe it's time to go back to the States.

PM: Wow. How did you run into Cindy?

JW: It's a long story, and sort of soap opera-ish.

PM: Really?

JW: Cindy was the best friend of my first steady girlfriend in high school, and we met through her.

PM: Wow.

JW: Yeah, kind of odd.

PM: That's beautiful. And so it was Cindy that brought you back, then, to Charlottesville in particular?

JW: No, actually. Cindy was, just by coincidence, living in Memphis at the time, which is my original hometown. So I met her there. And we lived in Memphis for a couple of years, and then moved to Charlottesville in 2005.

PM: So what brought you there? I mean, it's a beautiful place in the country. But something pulled you there?

JW: Well, I don't want to--

PM: Am I getting too personal? I don't mean to.

JW: Well, I don't know, it's not personal, I just don't like to say bad things about Memphis. They've had enough bad things happening there. But the situation there is not real good. I'll let it go at that. We just decided to move to a smaller town that had better schools. Cindy's daughter has two young children who were fixing to start school, and we just thought maybe it'd be better to go someplace where the schools aren't so troublesome.

PM: Oh, yeah, schools are getting troublesome all over the States, no doubt about it. Yeah, I would imagine that's a good neighborhood for--

JW: Yeah, it is. The schools here are really fine.

PM: When I started going through all the great Jesse tunes the last couple of days, and all the great covers, I remembered hearing Buddy and Julie Miller's gut-wrenching version of "A Showman's Life."

JW: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Wow, that's astonishing, I think, how many ways a good song can be done.

JW: Yeah, that Buddy and Julie, wow, those are a couple of very fine musicians, really very funky people.

PM: Yeah, they got something going on.

JW: Yeah, they do.

PM: Are there favorite covers of your songs that come to mind?

JW: It's a little hard because there's so much ego involved it's a little hard to separate the ego out from the real esthetic appreciation. But I always think of Ed Bruce's version of one of my tunes. Now, Ed Bruce, I think only made one record that I know of. But he and his wife wrote "Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" --

PM: Wow.

JW: -- for Willie and Waylon. And then he made a record on his own. And I don't know how many copies it sold. But at any rate he covered one of my tunes that was called "Evil Angel." He just tore it up, really, really good. So I think of that one. But I'm just happy with all of them.

PM: Yeah, absolutely. It's just such an amazing tribute when anybody covers a song.

JW: Yeah.

PM: When I was checking out the debut record -- I believe that's right -- on iTunes, I was amazed to read it had been released or reissued by no less than five times by five companies.

JW: Is that right?

PM: Yeah.

JW: Wow.

PM: They reeled them off -- Ampex -- I don't have them all in front of me. That's got to be some kind of a record.

JW: I have no idea.

PM: I was surprised to see that a song I like, "Step By Step," was used on *The Wire*.

JW: Yeah, yeah. I knew that. I started getting these emails from people about it, asking me, and the first I'd ever heard of it. They don't really tell you when these happen. All the paperwork and stuff is done elsewhere.

PM: Yeah, third-party.

JW: They never tell me about it.

PM: Yeah, so nobody calls you up and say, "Hey, is it okay if we're using in on *The Wire*?" Or, "Hey, they're using you on *The Wire*"?

JW: Nah, they don't need my permission.

PM: None of that.

JW: They make sure that they can do it without asking me.

PM: Right. So was that a show that you were aware of or had ever seen or--

JW: No.

PM: Oh, because that's a fantastic show.

JW: Yeah, I was reading a book -- in fact, I'm in the middle of it now -- by Richard Price -- I don't know if you know him. But he wrote for that show. He wrote a great book called *Clockers*.

PM: Exactly. I heard him on NPR at that time.

JW: Yeah. Well, he's a really good writer.

PM: What are you reading by him, Jesse?

JW: I'm reading a book called *Lush Life*. Yeah, it's good. Another New York crime kind of thing, street kids, that kind of thing.

PM: When I think of guys that write with a groove, but always have a mellowness to them, you know you're always near the top of that list. And so see a song pop up on as gritty a show as *The Wire*--

JW: Yeah, yeah. It's kind of weird.

PM: Songs are amazing like that.

JW: Yeah, they are.

PM: I heard you say on a radio show with Bob Edwards that you didn't own an acoustic until you were 30, which really surprised me. Are you mostly a nylon string guy now, or what do you like to play?

JW: I played nylon in performing, but I'm not really good at it. I just like the way it sounds. I started out wanting to be -- and still want to be -- Steve Cropper.

PM: [laughs] And still want to be. I like that.

JW: Yeah. I wanted to play guitar for Otis Redding and Sam & Dave, and those -- I wanted to be Steve Cropper. So I just played electric until somebody in Montreal stole my amplifier, and at that point I thought, well, I'm tired of carrying it around anyway. So at that point I bought an acoustic guitar, and that's what I do in performance. But I still love playing electric.

PM: What do you tend to play around the house these days?

JW: I've built a couple of Telecasters with -- there's this company in Washington State that sells parts for guitars, and you can put them together yourself.

PM: Who's that, Warmouth?

JW: Exactly, yeah. You know Warmouth?

PM: Oh, sure.

JW: So I've made a couple of Warmouths. And I love Telecasters. I keep telling people I think the Telecaster is the high-watermark of human civilization.

PM: Absolutely! I mean, people don't understand, for instance, what a great jazz guitar it is on the neck pickup.

JW: Just love it. Yeah, that's true, yeah. It's true. It's got a beautiful mellow sound when you want it, yeah.

PM: To me it's the most honest guitar.

JW: Yeah, that's right. Exactly. It's simple. There's nothing -- it's just a piece of plywood with--

PM: And it's got no bubbly in-between sounds.

JW: Yeah, it's nice. I love it.

PM: I'd love to hear anything at all that you'd say about your approach to songwriting, the most casual or the most detailed thing.

JW: I kind of think of it as two different stages. The first one would be the inspiration. And I have really no idea what that is, or how it happens, and I can't control it, and that's the frightening thing for me, is not being able to control it or turn it on or off.

PM: Right.

JW: I don't know where ideas come from. I cannot sit down -- I don't read a newspaper and say, "Oh, gee, that would make a nice song." It just doesn't happen that way for me. It just sort of comes out of nowhere.

PM: Right.

JW: And I just have to sort of cross my fingers. But once I have the idea then it becomes more craft, and you can -- you can say, "Well, I'm going to work from 9:00 to 5:00 on this." And you can do that, and make sure that everything scans properly and rhymes properly, and you can maintain a consistent point of view from beginning to end and it coheres.

PM: [laughs]

JW: Yeah, because normally that really is an issue. I can remember writing songs and you get to what you think is the end of it and realize that it started out being a sad song and wound up being a novelty song or something. You lost your point of view. So you have to be careful about that. But as I say, that's all something that you can work at and you don't have to depend upon something that you can't control. So that's the two phases of it for me.

PM: Wow. Thanks for that. Are there songwriters that you still enjoy a lot today that are still writing, whose work you still enjoy?

JW: There's a guy -- I don't even know his name -- I think his name is Castleman, but I'm not sure.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's his name. The guy that wrote those Alison Krauss tunes.

JW: He wrote "Let Me Touch You For a While." He wrote "The Lucky One." I think those are the only two I know.

PM: Oh, "The Lucky One," he wrote. [<http://www.robertleecastleman.com>]

JW: But those are so beautiful that I just know he's got to be super talented. So I love him.

PM: I think he's an ex-truck driver, if I'm not mistaken.

JW: Is that right?

PM: Yeah. I've got to check that out. But I think he was a truck driver and sent her songs.

JW: Well, he's a beautiful writer. There are so many great writers. Whoever is writing for -- and I think he helps write them himself -- or he may write them all himself -- is Kenny Chesney.

PM: Oh, now, he cuts a lot of outside songs.

JW: He has superb songwriters writing for him.

PM: Yeah, God bless him, he cuts a lot--

JW: And that song by Alan Jackson, "Drive" I believe is the title of it, and it's about his father teaching him to drive. Just some beautiful songwriting. There's so much great writing going on in Nashville, it hurts. But I'm still kind of hung up on the old guys myself, because I'm an old guy. So I love Chuck Berry -- I just don't think there's a better writer than Chuck Berry.

PM: [laughs] Oh, I second that emotion. I think his lyrics are just unbelievable.

JW: Speaking of "Second That Emotion," Smokey Robinson, and so many -- Harlan Howard and --

PM: Yeah.

JW: There's so many beautiful writers, I just wouldn't know where to stop.

PM: Do you like Bossa Nova or that kind of stuff, samba, Latin music?

JW: I love it, but I don't listen to it much anymore. But I've always loved Latin music, yeah.

PM: Because I wondered if -- "Rhumba Girl" is part of the way there, and certainly your nylon string -- so I thought, he might get into a little bit of Bossa Nova playing or that kind of stuff.

JW: No, I wish I could, but I can't.

PM: What are you reading these days, if you don't mind my asking? You mentioned the Price book.

JW: I normally read history. I love the Civil War and the Second World War. But I'll read about any period, really, that someone has written a good book about. We've had a spate of presidential biographies in the last little while, it seems like. I love those. I read mainly nonfiction, but every now and then I just want to stretch out with some fiction like Richard Price. Or I've just discovered this guy, Dennis Lehane who wrote *Mystic River* that they made a movie of. And he's written some -- well, I just read one, it was the first one, and it was great. So I'm going to read all of his.

PM: Dennis Lehane, yeah.

JW: Yeah. But I am a -- I don't think "disciple" is too strong a word, of P.G. Wodehouse.

PM: Ah.

JW: I have a collection, and I think he's -- he certainly gives me more pleasure than William Shakespeare, and his English is just sublime. To be that funny, but at the same time be that elegant and have a style that is so effortless and pure, that's my main man. And Evelyn Waugh is another one. But those two guys. Graham Greene is the third, I think. Those are my top writers, I think.

PM: Wow. On another note, do you consider yourself a spiritual guy?

JW: You know, everybody says yes to that, I think. The thing to say these days is "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual."

PM: [laughs]

JW: And I guess I got to go along with it. I don't go to any -- I don't belong to anything, and I don't intend to. I don't like to define myself that much. So yeah, I guess I am. Does that mean I believe in God? I guess it does. And that's about as definitive about it as I can get. I don't know. One of my favorite actors was Peter Ustinov. And he said something that I've never forgotten. He said, "We are divided by our beliefs and we're united by our doubts." That's a very profound thing for me. If religion is so great, why does it set us against each other? But what we doubt -- we all have questions about what happens when we die and all of that stuff, et cetera. I think he's right on about that.

PM: What are the plans for touring? Will there be a little or a lot?

JW: I guess the idea is to do a lot.

PM: How does that suit you?

JW: Well, I love doing some. I love it. But when it gets to be too much, then I start to get kind of down.

PM: Sure.

JW: And that's not good. So it's a fine line for me, and it's up to me to say no when it's too much. So I'm okay with it. It's better than the alternative where nobody wants to hear you, that's for sure.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, it beats the hell out of that. Well, there will be plenty of people that want to hear you and haven't had the chance often enough. And we're just thrilled to see *Love Filling Station* out, and are glad to be part of the effort to help push it out there.

JW: Oh, well, bless your heart, Frank. Thank you, man.

PM: You bet, Jesse. It's just wonderful talking to you. I've been a good fan many years.

JW: Oh, well, thank you for that, bud.

PM: All right. You take care of yourself--

JW: Okay, kid. I'll talk to you later.